

Assimilation of Somali Refugees and Immigrants in the Kansas City Area

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Geography
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the assimilation challenges of Somali refugees and immigrants in the Kansas City area. The process of immigrant assimilation has both economic and socio- cultural dimensions, and the purpose of this project was to understand those aspects of immigrant integration. This project was especially is dedicated to gain a deeper knowledge of the challenges faced by Somali immigrants while trying to adapt to the culture and ways of the host societies in light of their culture, traditions and economic conditions. I examined the role that gender, age and local institutions play in the assimilation process as well as the transnational nature of individual's lives. The role that place plays in the assimilation dynamics and the impact of a growing ethnic enclave on the cultural landscape of Kansas City were also themes elucidated in this work.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and advice of many people, to whom I am very grateful. I have been really fortunate to have Garth Myers as my advisor. I would not have been able to finish this dissertation without his understanding and support. Thank you Garth for your not giving up on me, even though I was far from a model student. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee Ebenezer Obadare, Johannes Feddema, Jay Johnson and especially Peter Ukpokodu for all their time, encouragement and support.

I would not have survived the first year of graduate school without the help of the incredible Ang Gray. Thank you Ang, for being so patient with me and walking me through that first semester of teaching. I am really indebted to Teresa Lamsam for always being there for me. She has been a patient listener and her advice has helped me through many difficult situations. I am also really grateful to the KU Environmental Studies Program and the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communication for funding me at a time when my own department failed to do so. I would not have been able to complete this degree without their support. Bev Morey and Bev Koerner from Geography have been incredibly helpful to me over the last five years and I am thankful to them for all their help. I am grateful to Leatrice Smith for her help too.

My fieldwork for this Dissertation would not have been possible without the help of Mr. Farah Abdi, Jawahir Aden and all my other Somali friends whom I cannot name. Thank you for sharing your lives with me. I hope I have done justice to all your stories.

I am grateful to the friends who helped me from the time I first came to the United States: Rose Emergo, Julien Esposito, Sakeeb Mehdi, Faisal Mirza and Anurag Pant. I am really thankful to Dhivya Ketharnath who has been a great friend since my first day in the United States and who helped me out when I was on the verge of being without a home. Thank you Dhivya for being there for me.

There are a few people who have stuck with me through the highs and lows of my life and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them. Thank you Deborupa Mitra, Roshni Roy, Nilofar Doctor, Tanya Gracias and Harpreet Kaur for everything you have done for me. I would also like to thank Hilary Hungerford, Chris Wease and their beautiful daughter and my goddaughter, June Kara for helping me get through some of the darkest days of my life. I would not have been able to survive the last five months of graduate school without your support and June's smile. Thank you Makame Muhajir for all your good advice and encouragement over the past four years.

I would not be what I am today without my parents, sister and Kanchhakaku who taught me never to give up. Thank you Maa and Baba for always supporting my dreams and teaching me to fight. You are the reason I keep going and someday, I hope to make up for all the grey hair I have given you. I hope you forgive me Kanchhakaku for not being there during your last moments. You were my third parent and I miss you every single day.

Lastly, I thank my confidante, my best friend and my one-man support system, Dimitra Atri for his incredible love, patience and support over the past four years. Thank you for

keeping me sane. This dissertation would not be here if it was not for you and I hope someday, I can be as selfless as you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The number of documented African immigrants in the United States grew forty-fold between 1960 and 2007, from 35,355 to 1.4 million. Most of this growth has taken place since 1990. Before 1990, the main source countries in Africa were Nigeria, Ethiopia and Egypt, but since the early 1990s there has been a shift in the source countries. While those three countries above continue to send migrants to the US, the pool of African migrants is much more diverse now. As a result of civil wars, social upheaval and historical connections, for example, there are more Somalis, Sudanese and Liberians coming to the United States now than ever before (IOM Report, 2009).

Most of these refugees go to traditional immigrant hot spots like New York, Ohio, Washington DC or Chicago. In the case of Somali immigrants, some more surprising destinations are prominent, such as Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota or Columbus, Ohio. The twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have long been a major destination of Somali immigrants and they now have a rather large and powerful Somali community. However, in the last decade what started as a trickle of Somali refugees being settled in Kansas City has now grown to a full blown community of over five thousand people. While it is nowhere as big or as powerful as the community in Minneapolis, it is a fast growing one that is changing the face of this not so multiculturally diverse Midwestern city.

In the following pages I develop a cultural geographical examination of the assimilation process of the Somalis in the Kansas City area. My study focuses on the problems and challenges faced by these immigrants in adjusting to this alien environment. Further, I examine the transnational nature of their lives and the role that gender and age play in their lives.

Although migration has always been at the heart of nomadic culture in Somalia, out-migration was relatively rare until the collapse of the regime of President Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 and the ensuing civil war. It is only after the fall of Siad Barre's regime and the intensified warfare between rival factions that a large number of Somalis were forced to flee their country.

The major migration flows of Somalis are shown in the following table:

Table 1.1: Major Somali Migration Flows

Time Period	Migration Flow
1910s-1960s	Somalis settle in the UK; less so in Italy; few in numbers
1970s-1980s	Migrant Workers to the Gulf States
1978- 1988	After Somalia's loss in Ogaden war with Ethiopia in 1978, many refugees arrive. First political refugees seek asylum abroad, but in small numbers.
1988-present	Hargeysa 1988, first refugee movement into Ethiopia; Mogadishu 1991, second refugee movement into Kenya, Ethiopia, North America, Europe, and Australia.

Source: Gundel, 2002.

The Somali diaspora is estimated to be approximately one million and is spread over a large number of countries in Europe, the Persian Gulf and North America (UNDP Report 2009). This relatively new population is already rather large and likely to grow for some time.

Furthermore, like most refugees before them, Somalis are extremely disadvantaged as a consequence of their forced migration. By definition refugees flee to escape persecution and willingly relocate wherever the odds of survival are better than those encountered in their homeland at time of departure (Shacknove 1985; Hein 1993). However, because of their unanticipated relocation, refugees often find themselves in an extremely disadvantaged position (Richmond 1988). As far as the Somalis are concerned there are several disadvantages that they face. As refugees they may well have already experienced severe psychological trauma that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. They are in fact alive only because they have managed to relocate to a safer location. Still, refugees frequently have little say in where they are ultimately resettled (Portes and Borocz 1989). Often they are relocated within a nation where they do not speak the language or where they are unfamiliar with societal norms and customs (Kunz 1981). Also, when relocating from a less to a more developed country refugees must frequently adapt to a level of technical sophistication for which they are completely unprepared (Stein 1981). Apart from that, Somalis, as a racial minority of the Muslim faith, can be at a double disadvantage in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in this predominantly Christian nation. This may give them restricted access to various education and job

opportunities. There is also a significant language barrier, which can be particularly difficult for the older people (many of whom have had no formal education) to overcome.

Research Questions and Fieldwork

Going into this project I had two basic questions. The first concerned how Somali refugees and immigrants cope with their lives in a totally different environment and what factors affect their assimilation process. The second concerned how they make their mark on the cultural landscape of this mid-sized Midwestern city which is a non-traditional migrant getaway.

In doing this research, I identified and focused on the main challenges of assimilation: Language, Culture, Gender, Age, Education, Employment, Social Support, Citizenship and Advocacy. In addition to these factors, I studied the resettlement policies of the United States and the lives of these refugees in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, which was home for most of Kansas City's Somalis for a decade or more prior to their arrival in the United States. I also examined the role of family and community support in assimilation as well the role of three main local organizations which help them during various phases of the resettlement process.

My fieldwork in northeast Kansas City was conducted over a period of two and a half years. I visited the site several times between January and April 2009 and then communicated with an official of the Somali Foundation Inc. in May 2009. Research

partnerships were established with representatives of this organization as well as other members of the Somali community in Kansas City who further introduced me to their own families as well as other Somali families settled in Kansas City. All the meetings, discussions, focus groups and interview sessions with them were either conducted at the Somali Foundation office, public libraries, coffee shops, their homes or my own house.

In total, I interviewed 60 Somali refugees, and made sure that they represented both males and females of all age groups. I have used pseudonyms for all my interviewees. I also spent time observing various Somali cultural events, English Language classes, Somali youth meetings and women's conferences. I have also communicated with service providers and staff from mutual assistance associations that served refugees; these totaled to eleven interviews. These were conducted on site as well as through email and telephone. I used interpreters, especially while interviewing elderly Somalis. None of the families and the interpreters was compensated in fiscal terms but I did, from time to time cook and buy meals and beverages for them.

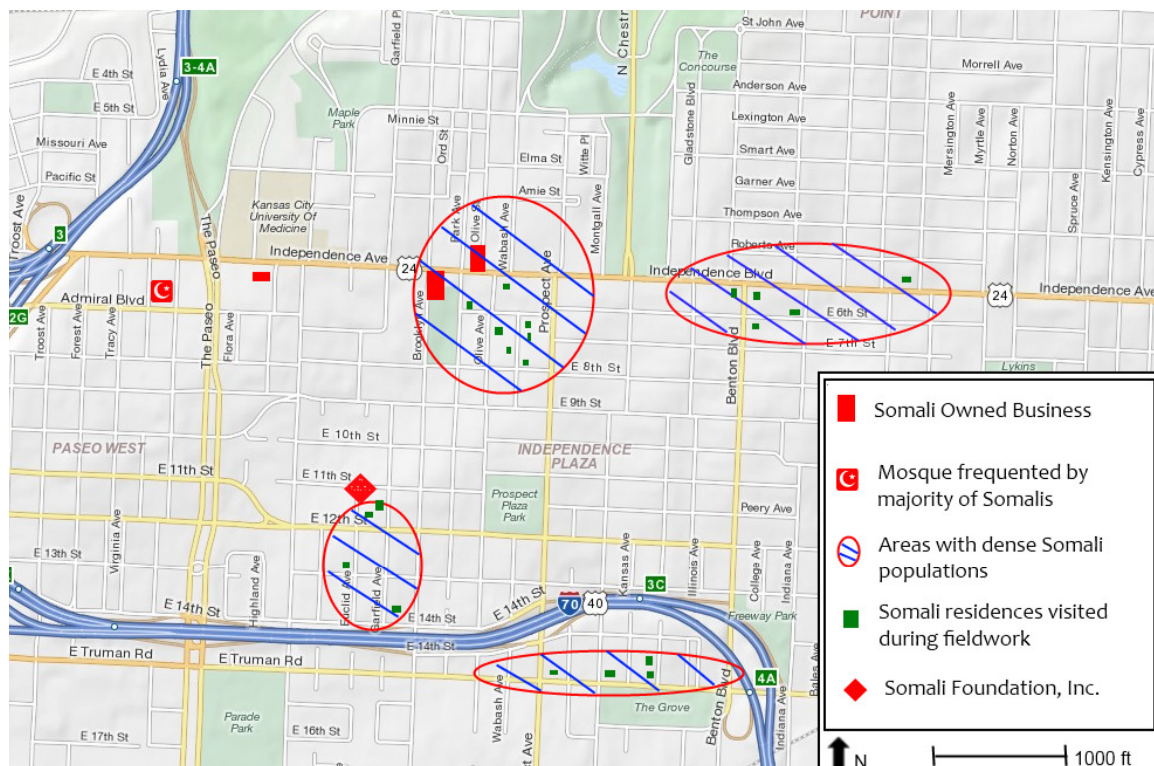
While in the field one can't really help but notice how the Somalis (and immigrants from other African countries) are quickly and conveniently categorized as African-Americans by the larger host society. It is also quite evident that Somalis are not really happy with this categorization and do not think of themselves as a part of that group. Being Africans of the Muslim faith, it is difficult for them to reach positions of power. This is changing slowly, however, as is apparent from the election of Congressman Keith Ellison of

Minneapolis, who is the first Muslim to be elected to the United States Congress. This was made possible due to the support of the large Somali population in the city

Study Area

The Somali community in Kansas City is largely concentrated in the north eastern part of the city (area indicated in Fig 2) in the area between Independence Avenue and Kansas City downtown.

Map 1.1: Map of the Study Area, Northeast Kansas City, Missouri



Courtesy: Hilary Hungerford

This is one of Kansas City's oldest residential neighbourhoods and has a history of hosting low income immigrant communities since the late 19th century. Irish and Italian

immigrants first settled here in Kansas City (which led to the establishment of the Don Bosco Centers in 1940) and in the 1950s, this area also became home to Holocaust survivors (which subsequently led to the formation of the Jewish Vocational Services). At present, this area houses more than 35 immigrant communities including Somalis, Sudanese, Mexicans, Vietnamese, Hmong and Pakistanis. Northeast Kansas City is home to most immigrant communities and low income groups of the host community because of the low housing costs. There have been several city-led and private sector proposals to re-develop this area, but they had to be stalled due to issues like drugs, prostitution and an increasing crime rate.

Similarities between Minneapolis-St.Paul and Kansas City

As mentioned earlier, Minnesota's twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have become the de facto "capital" of the Somali community in North America. The Somali population in these two cities is estimated to be around 70,000. Unlike cities like Washington DC, New York or Los Angeles, the twin cities are not a traditional top choice for immigrants. But Somalis here arrive directly from refugee camps or in secondary migrations from other U.S. cities, drawn by an attractive urban job market and refugee service agencies. The meatpacking industry in Minnesota and an abundance of jobs, which do not require knowledge of English, are among the main factors that draw the Somali immigrants to this area (Shandy and Fennelly 2006).

In the case of Kansas City, Missouri, most of the Somalis have come here because of the Jewish Vocational Services, an active contracted refugee service agency for the US government which has a base here. Kansas City provides affordable housing and education opportunities apart from providing ample job opportunities to people with limited language skills. Although the Somali population in the area is not as large as that of the twin cities, it has grown steadily over the last decade and is estimated to be around 5000. The community here is concentrated in the North-eastern part of the city which has historically hosted migrant populations falling in the lower end of the economic ladder. Apart from the regular jobs available to the non-English speaking population, there are a number of Somali owned businesses that have cropped up in this part of the city, and these hire mainly Somali people. These include several health care enterprises, restaurants, grocery shops and even a small shopping mall, which has around fifteen shops selling traditional Somali clothes and food.

Both of these cities are mid-sized Midwestern cities which provide similar services and job opportunities which are attractive to refugees and immigrants from Somalia. The Twin Cities along with Bloomington Wisconsin are ranked as the 16th and Kansas City is ranked as the 29th most populous city in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011). The important difference for my study lies in the fact that while the Somali community in Minneapolis is quite strong both in terms of population and political influence, the one in Kansas City is a relatively new one which is growing slowly and making a mark in the cultural landscape of the city.

Review of Literature

All research must be grounded in a solid foundation of tried and tested theoretical models. In the following pages I review some of the theories that I refer to in my dissertation. The dramatic changes in immigrant settlement patterns during the past thirty years have provided geographers and other scholars with fertile ground for ongoing work analyzing the residential patterns of various groups (Hardwick 2008). Geographers like William Frey (1995) have pointed out that in today's US metropolitan areas, sharp disparities often exist between white populations and racial and ethnic minorities. He termed these patterns *demographic balkanization*, referring to the well bounded spatial boundaries among these groups. This terminology was however, criticized by Ellis and Wright (1998) who pointed out that using the term *balkanization* to describe the spatial patterns of settlement of foreign born groups in the United States may create a negative perception about the placing of immigrant groups in the American cities (Hardwick 2008).

Geographers Zelinsky and Lee formulated a new theory called *heterolocalism* in the late 1990s to explain the significance of dispersed immigrant patterns and their relationship to the maintenance of ethnic identity (Zelinsky and Lee 1998). This theory suggests that the improvements in communication technology and transportation have increased the potential accessibility of residential space, thereby making it possible for certain ethnic and racial groups to maintain their identities through time no matter where they live. Therefore, despite lack of physical proximity, ethnic ties remain strong at varying scales

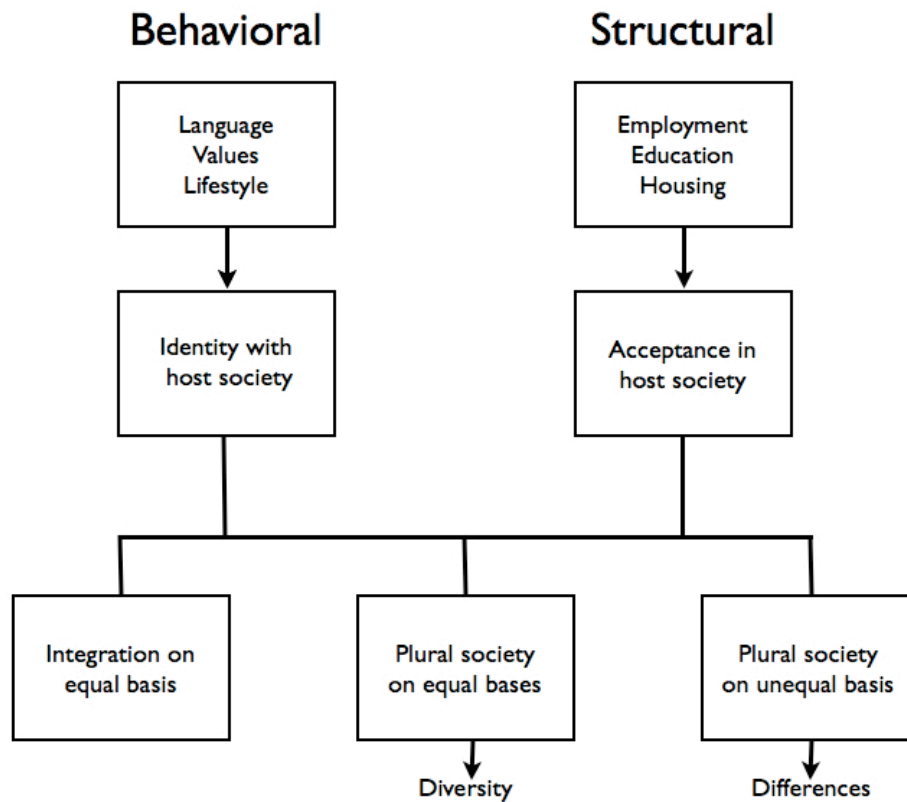
on analysis including the neighbourhood, urban, regional, national and even international level. Thus, in essence, *heterolocalism* offers an alternative theory to help explain and link the spatial patterns of immigrants with their assimilation rates and ethnic identities (Hardwick 2008).

Assimilation, according to Jacobson (1998) is not only about changing residential and behavioral patterns anymore, though such changes do occur in these processes, but more about the shifting boundaries of identity and race in the American society and the inclusion of some groups but not others, within the imagined and material spaces of the mainstream. Similarly, Kay Anderson's (1991) work on Vancouver's Chinatown speaks about the ideological construction of race, the definition of mainstream in relation to the Other and the negotiation social boundaries in the spaces of everyday life (Nagel 2009).

The locations and roles of religious institutions, social clubs, businesses and other immigrant gathering places as sites of ethnic identity and cultural maintenance have been the focus of other work on immigration by geographers (Hardwick 2008). Elizabeth Chacko and Ivan Cheung's (2006) work on the formation of ethnic enclaves by Ethiopian immigrants in the Los Angeles area shows how immigrants make effective use of imagery and identity to project the idea of the enclave as a site of authentic ethnic and cultural experience. Beattie and Ley (2003) in another study documented the changing role of immigrant churches through time in Vancouver, British Columbia, thus emphasizing the role and importance of religious institutions in immigrant communities. There are urban geographers like Pacione (2005: 383) who talk about behavioral and structural assimilation of the immigrant communities in cities:

There the former describes a process of acculturation whereby members of a group acquire the behavior, attitudes, sentiments and values of the charter group, and by sharing their experience and history are incorporated within them in a common cultural life. Structural assimilation, on the other hand, refers to the distribution of migrant ethnic population through the social system and the migrants' ability to compete successfully in occupational, educational and housing markets and enter key decision-making positions in government, business and other spheres of society.

Figure 1.1: Pacione's Model of the Assimilation Process

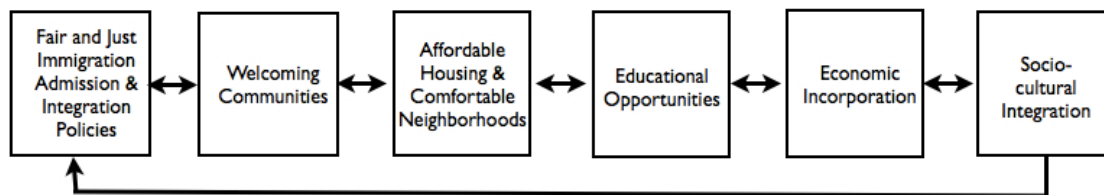


Source: Pacione (2005)

Both these processes, according to Pacione, are temporal and while behavioral assimilation might be attainable by all groups, structural assimilation will vary with type of ethnic minority, and also the attitude of the charter group.

New immigrant flows have had a deep impact on the economic, social, cultural and political structures of metropolitan areas in North America which have become “cities of nations” (Biles, Burstein & frderes 2008; Li & Teixeira 2007; Murdie & Teixeira 2006). They are now among the most multicultural places in the world, and as a consequence of this transformation, immigrants and refugees now face a range of new and unique challenges in their settlement experiences (Teixeira & Li 2009). Teixeira and Li (2009) further explain that the successful integration of immigrants and refugees into a new society depends on access to affordable housing in a safe neighbourhood of a “welcoming society/community”, access to good education and availability of employment opportunities.

Figure 1.2: Structure of a Welcoming Society



Source: Teixeira and Li (2009)

Apart from geographers, another discipline which has a long history in immigration research is sociology. There are a number of prominent sociological models that were developed to study the assimilation processes of immigrant populations in host societies. It is important for any researcher working on immigrant assimilation, including geographers, to be familiar with this vast literature to facilitate understanding of the core issues of assimilation.

The *Classic Assimilation Theory* was propounded by the Chicago School in the 1920s and more recently has been used in the works of sociologists like Richard Alba (1990, 1997, 2003), Victor Nee (2003) and Milton Gordon (1964; see also Brown and Bean 2006). This theory uses “straight line convergence” or “linear assimilation” to understand how the integration of ethnic groups occurs. Linear assimilation predicts a steady, generational transition in which immigrant-origin groups take on the demographic, economic and cultural characteristics of natives. In family forms, distinct ethnocultural characteristics fade in strength over time and ethnic families become indistinguishable from native ones. The assimilation model implies pronounced generational effects; first-generation families are expected to be patently distinct, second-generation ones less so, and so forth (Gratton, Gutmann and Skop 2007).

In 1964, Gordon Milton postulated the following stages that follow the acquisition of culture and language in assimilation:

- Structural assimilation (close social relations with the host society)
- Large scale intermarriage
- Ethnic identification with the host society
- Ending of prejudice, discrimination and value conflict

It is important to note that he did not propound another theory; instead he came up with a few additions to the original Chicago School model.

In the *New Assimilation Theory*, which is almost like a follow up to the Classical model, Richard Alba and Victor Nee in 1997 refined Gordon's account by arguing that certain institutions, including those bolstered by civil rights law, play important roles in achieving assimilation. They give the example of Jewish organizations that persuaded the New York City Council in 1946 to threaten the tax-exempt status of colleges or universities that discriminated on the basis of race or religion (Brown and Bean 2006). Alba and Nee stress upon the fact that incorporation of immigrant groups needs change and acceptance by the native population.

Theorists as diverse as the sociologists Nathan Glazer, Alejandro Portes and the scholarly politician Patrick Moynihan have argued that the assimilation of many groups often remains blocked. This stream of thought is called the *Racial/Ethnic Disadvantage Model*. These theorists tend to talk as much of racial or ethnic pluralism as much as they talk about ethnic disadvantage. However, in more recent works, analysts of this variety (and particularly Portes) argue that language and cultural familiarity might not always lead to increased assimilation. Lingering discrimination and institutional barriers to employment and other opportunities block complete assimilation (Portes 1993 and 2005; Moynihan 1963; Glazer 1993). According to this way of thinking, immigrants compare socioeconomic opportunities in the host country to those of their countries of origin and

might not be able to perceive these existing barriers, and by the second and third generations, they slowly realize that the goal of full assimilation may be more difficult and may take longer than anticipated. This realization might have social and cultural consequences, including sometimes the reemergence of racial/ethnic consciousness (Bean and Brown 2006).

In 1993, Portes and Min Zhou combined elements of both straight-line assimilation and the ethnic disadvantage perspectives into a framework they call *Segmented Assimilation*. According to them, structural barriers like poor urban schools limit access to employment and other opportunities, and these obstacles are often more severe in the case of the more disadvantaged members of immigrant groups. Such impediments can lead to stagnant or downward mobility, even as the children of other immigrants follow divergent paths toward classic straight-line assimilation. Heavily disadvantaged children of immigrants may even reject assimilation altogether and embrace attitudes, orientations, and behaviors considered "oppositional" in nature, such as joining a street gang. More advantaged groups may sometimes embrace traditional home-country attitudes and use them to inspire their children to achieve selective acculturation (Portes and Zhou 1993).

Segmented assimilation also focuses on identifying the cultural, structural and contextual factors that separate successful assimilation from unsuccessful or even "negative" assimilation. Portes and Zhou argue that it is particularly important to identify such factors in the case of the second generation, because obstacles facing the children of

immigrants can thwart assimilation at perhaps its most critical juncture (Portes and Zhou 1993)

While many of the immigrant children will find ways to the mainstream, others will be blocked out of it as a consequence of racialization. Portes, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller (2005: 1006) argue:

Children of Asian, black, mulatto, and mestizo immigrants cannot escape their ethnicity and race, as defined by the mainstream. Their enduring physical differences from whites and the equally persistent strong effects of discrimination based on those differences ... throw a barrier in the path of occupational mobility and social acceptance. Immigrant children's identities, their aspirations, and their academic performance are affected accordingly.

All the above theories have been criticized on various counts. While the Classical model has been criticized for being “Anglo- conformist” because immigrant groups were shown as conforming to unchanging, middle-class, white-Protestant values, the New model suggested by Alba and Nee which acknowledged the fact that assimilation takes place within racially and economically heterogeneous contexts was criticized for trying to define assimilation too broadly, thus taking it to the point where it lost its meaning. The Racial/ethnic disadvantage model was criticized for overly stressing racial and ethnic barriers and for failing to explain socioeconomic mobility. Critics of the Segmented Assimilation model point out that attributing poor economic outcome to racialization may sometimes lead to masking the real factors behind it, like family financial obligations, lackluster job growth and so forth. Another critique of the model is that since it has not been empirically tested beyond the current second generation (the members of which are

still quite young) segmented assimilation may misinterpret oppositional attitudes historically found among the young and misconstrue the pace of assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003, Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999)

Methodology

Power relations are an integral part of every research project, and as I began my research with the Somali community in Kansas City, questions about power disparities concerned me. My research involved becoming familiar with the Somali community and interviewing people in order to understand their life experiences in the United States. As I began my research, I viewed my fieldwork areas as power-laden sites that required critical, feminist methodology to undertake meaningful research.

For feminist researchers navigating power structures within their own research, it is important is to arm themselves with theories and methods, the “‘sister’ elements in empirical investigation” (DeVault, 1999: 215). Feminist theories shape and influence our understanding of oppression and our intention of preventing harm to those with whom we conduct our research. As researchers we should be intentional in conceiving and constructing research encounters based on solid theoretical grounding because theories inform our ways of getting at the knowledge we seek.

While doing their fieldwork many social science researchers go to a place “out there”, completely removed from the mundane details of their daily routine, and undertake

research with people whom they do not know, in order to produce knowledge on their specific topics. What this does is leave the entire control in the hands of the researchers; but being a feminist researcher, it is important for me to find ways to create inclusive and balanced spaces of knowledge creation.

DeVault (1999: 216) explains that “research participants will exercise agency, too, if we let them; they decide whether to talk with us, what to say and how, when to withdraw, and so on”. She further adds, that “watching carefully for those decisions and respecting them are large steps toward leveling the power relations of the research encounter”. Knowledge produced through fieldwork is from cooperation by participants and should not be just about the researcher trying to uncover truths. It is important for us to make sure that the participants feel free to enact their complex subjectivity and multiple identities. We should acknowledge and respect the participants’ decisions of when and how to talk.

The feminist researcher does not just enter the field site, uncover, and announce extant injustices. Rather, she should study “both the consequences of power and how it is exercised” (DeVault, 1999: 217) in collaboration with participants. This can have profound and revolutionary effects on everyone involved: researchers can gain a real understanding and participants can gain articulation of their ideas. This method helps us navigate and avoid hierarchical structuring and makes the participants aware of their own abilities.

The process of doing fieldwork often evokes a sense of being caught between worlds and identities. Even if “home” and “field” are discrete physical sites, researchers may be torn between private and research personas as they move from one setting to the other (Till, 2001). Positionality is a critical factor in framing social and professional relationships in the field: it sets the tone of the research, affecting its course and its outcomes (Chacko, 2004). In keeping with the viewpoints of feminist theory, “positionality” here refers to aspects of identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality and other attributes that are markers of relational positions in society, rather than intrinsic qualities (Chacko, 2004).

My research on Somalis has left me having to constantly negotiate my identity in the field. Being a non-white female who is quite familiar with Islamic traditions it did not take very long for me to become comfortable with the Somali community. Their knowledge of and familiarity with Indian movies and our similarly conservative backgrounds played a significant part in getting me access to the homes of the Somali people in Kansas City. Different aspects of my identity helped me become comfortable with Somali men and women. As far as the women are concerned, being a woman, and - despite being non-Muslim - my knowledge of Islamic traditions and similar food habits helped both the Somali women I spoke to and me to become comfortable with each other. During the first few meetings I felt like they were the researchers and I was the subject. I was asked questions about my family, traditions and so forth. I happily went along with their curiosity, because I knew this would get me access (even though partial) to their

inner circle. As for the men, being non-American or non-white played a very important role. One of my American colleagues, who speaks Somali fluently (I don't), had a hard time talking to Somalis about their status in the country. When it came to me, I did not even have to ask. They freely spoke about their status in the United States, their likes, dislikes, career goals and so forth. Therefore, although there are times I have difficulties dealing with the insider/outsider, gendered male/female, Somali/Non-Somali vibes, these difficulties made me more aware of the situations I am in and the people I am with and have helped make my research more informed.

Much of this study reflects traditional interpretive techniques such as qualitative interviews and participant observation. In this case, the interviews were semi-structured and open ended. Tightly structured questionnaires limit the scope of understanding for a researcher. Semi structured and exploratory questions, on the other hand, though more difficult to analyze, often yield more in depth and sometimes unanticipated responses which offer valuable insights. Kevin Dunn (2000: 88) has very appropriately described semi structured interviews as employing what he calls an "interview guide":

The questions asked in the interview are content focused and deal with the issues or areas judged by the researcher to be relevant to the research question. Alternatively, an interview schedule might be prepared with fully worded questions for a semi-structured interview, but the interviewer would not be restricted to deploying those questions. The semi-structured interview is organized around ordered but flexible questioning. In semi-structured forms of interview the role of the researcher (interviewer or facilitator) is recognized as being more interventionist than in unstructured interviews. This requires that the researcher

redirect the conversation if it has moved too far from the research topics.

Therefore, I conducted interviews using a semi-structural format wherein inquiries were loosely structured around core questions related to the central concerns of this study. As far as identifying and accessing participants is concerned, I have used the technique of snowball sampling and relied on gatekeepers for initial contacts. Gatekeepers are “those individuals...that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research” (Burgess 1984: 48). According to Kearns (2000: 195) “developing a geography of everyday experience requires us to move beyond reliance on formalized interactions such as those occurring in interview” to “being part of everyday interactions.” Bennett (2002: 139) argues that participant observation attempts to go beyond forcing answers to a question informed by specific knowledge and “it is about being able to open oneself up to different ways of constructing social life and knowledge”. Therefore, participatory observation has been a very important part of my fieldwork, and I spent about six months familiarizing myself with the people, their culture and study area before starting actual interviews.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter two I explain the circumstances leading to the collapse of the Somali state, the flight of Somalis from their homeland, the establishment of the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya and the lives of the Somali refugees there. Almost all my interviewees spent more than a decade in these refugee camps before coming to Kansas City; therefore it is

important to understand their lives and insecurities in Dadaab in order to be able to better understand their perception of life here, the assimilation challenges they face and their reactions to those.

In Chapter three I take a look at refugee resettlement policies and programs in the United States and the influence of social welfare ideology on this process. I also give an overview of the three main local organizations that help the Somali refugees resettle in Kansas City. Each of these organizations perform specific functions in the lives of the refugees, and I discuss their merits and drawbacks in addition to briefly outlining a few projects that are being planned to make the Somali community more visible in the economic and social landscape of the city.

Chapter four is entitled “From Somalis to Somali-Americans,” and in it I explore the factors that influence the assimilation of Somali refugees in Kansas City and indeed elsewhere. I have identified several major challenges faced by the Somalis while trying to adapt to American culture and I discuss each of those in detail.

In Chapter five I tell the stories of five completely different Somali individuals in Kansas City. This chapter gives a face to all that has been said in the rest of my dissertation. The scholarship references, my fieldwork, my findings, everything would appear to be in a vacuum if we cannot associate real human faces with them. In addition to anchoring all

the theories and ideas, this chapter also provides a look into the lives of Somali refugees who perceive and deal with the challenges in the host country completely differently and stops us from seeing refugees as this homogeneous, faceless and vulnerable group of people who came to the United States with the motive of living off public assistance.

In chapter six, I look into the emerging Somali ethnic enclave along Independence Avenue in northeast Kansas City. It is still in its nascent stages, but over the last two years, I have seen the expansion of places of worship as well as new Somali businesses come up in the area. The Somali presence is palpable here and I look into how these new refugees create an ethnic place, “a city within a city” where they can congregare with their co-ethnics and which gives them a sense of their home.

In Chapter seven I conclude my dissertation with a summary of my major findings, including the influences of language, employment, social interactions, and the importance of national affiliation. In addition to that, I have a few recommendations for the resettlement agencies, which might improve the assimilation process for the Somali refugees. In the end, I discuss potential projects for my postdoctoral research.

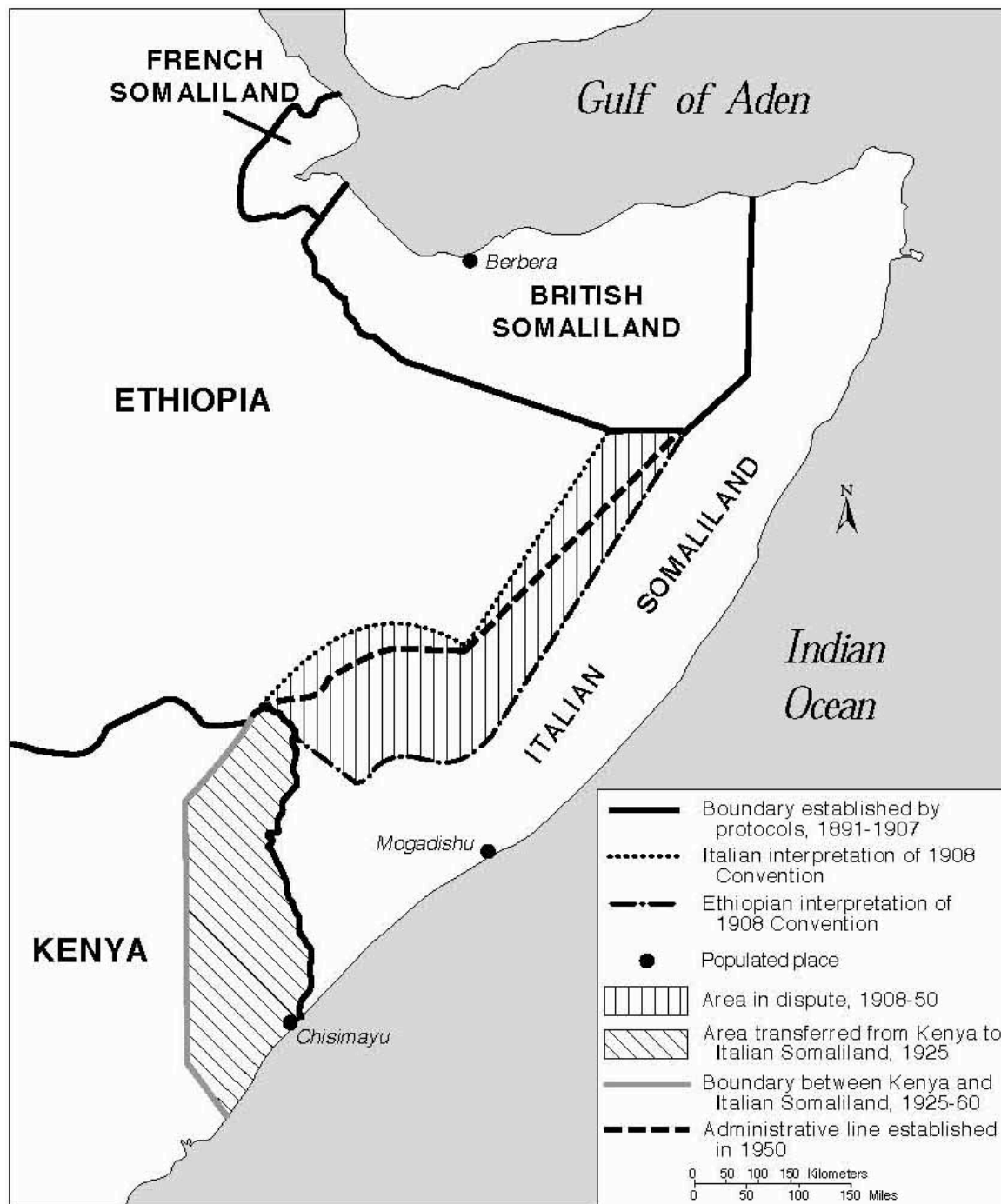
Chapter 2: The Collapse of Somalia, The Flight of the Somali People and Their Lives in the Dadaab Refugee Camps

Somalia is located in Eastern Africa (Figure 2), east of Ethiopia bordering the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. It has an estimated total population of nine million. Most of Somalia's people are Sunni (Orthodox) Muslims, and although there are three major ethnic groups (Somali, Bantu, and Arab) the overwhelming majority of the population shares Somali ethnicity.

In the late 1800s, France, Italy, Ethiopia and Britain began competing for territory in Somalia. The northern part of present day Somalia was British Somaliland from 1884 to 1960 and the southern part was under Italian control from 1889 to 1936. Present day Djibouti became the French Somaliland (formally the French Territory of the Afars and Issas) from 1896 to 1967, while the Ogaden/Haud wet season pasturelands of the Somali became part of the Ethiopian empire from 1896 onward. In 1956 the Italian Somaliland was granted autonomy and complete independence in 1960. British Somaliland also gained independence in June 1960, and on July 1, 1960 the legislatures of the two new states formed the United Republic of Somalia. The new state has enjoyed very little political stability in its first half-century.

In 1969, President Abd-i-rashid Ali Shermarke was assassinated. The new rulers, led by Maj. Gen. Mohamed Siad Barre, dissolved the national assembly, banned political parties, and established a supreme revolutionary council with the power to rule by decree pending adoption of a new constitution, and Somalia was declared a Socialist state.

Map 2.1: Colonial Map of Somalia showing the British, Italian and French territories



Source: Center for Justice and Accountability (<http://www.cja.org/article.php?id=436>)

While Siad Barre's regime began with a modicum of public support and rhetorical claims for national unity, it rather steadily revealed itself to be an autocratic dictatorship with territorial ambitions. In the late 1970s, Somalia began supporting ethnic Somali rebels seeking independence for the long disputed Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Somalia invaded the disputed territory in 1977 but was driven out by Ethiopian forces in 1978. Guerrilla warfare in the Ogaden continued until 1988, when Ethiopia and Somalia reached a peace accord (Lewis 2002, Samatar 1994 and 2002).

After years of increasing regional tensions and political repression, in January 1991, Siad Barre's regime was overthrown by the United Somali Congress, which made Ali Mahdi Mohamed interim president and invited other opposition groups such as the Somali Salvation Democratic Front and the Somali National Movement to join negotiations in order to form a new government. The Somali National Movement and other groups refused to take part in the discussion, and in May 1991 they (The Somali National Movement) restored independent sovereignty and formed the Somaliland Republic in the former British Somaliland. The 1991 conflicts among factions ultimately led to a full-on civil war, coinciding with one of the worst African droughts of the century, which in turn created a devastating famine in 1992, resulting in a loss of some 300,000 lives (Kubaki, Bodin and Feit, 2005, Samatar 1994 and 2002, Samatar 2000).

In response, in 1992 the United States launched *Operation Restore Hope* to establish a secure environment in order to deliver humanitarian relief in Somalia. The United Nations started to disarm Somali militias and destroy weapons.

Map 2.2: Map of Somalia



Source: UNHCR, 2007

This intervention by the United States and the United Nations has since been criticized as having been very poorly planned and went on to provoke further civilian deaths and destruction which fuelled clan- based violence and lawlessness (Peterson 2000, Hirsch

and Oakley 1995, Samatar 1994) Even after the US/UN withdrawal from Somalia, civil war and fighting between factions continued.

Map 2.3: Somaliland, Puntland and Somalia



Source: www.africa.confidential.com

Successive transitional governments have remained on the verge of collapse. A militant Islamic insurgency has left the country ravaged and in a perpetual state of insecurity despite, or perhaps because of an intervention by the Ethiopian military from December 2006 to January 2009. It has now become one of the world's worst humanitarian and security crises, with the Ethiopian military intervention, combined with the US bombings of suspected militant hide-outs, setting in motion a chain of events that in mid-2008 culminated in the recapture of much of the country's south by the hard-line Islamist insurgent group, Al- Shabaab. The official number of civilians killed since December

2006 stands at 20,000 (Moreo and Lentin 2010)

In these five years, Somalia has been mired in a brutal conflict between the Transitional Federal Government, which only holds a part of the capital Mogadishu, and armed opposition groups, which control the rest of the country. Conflicts continue in strategically important areas, especially in the South and in Mogadishu (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Although Al-Shabaab has secured relative peace in some areas under its control, security has come at the intolerable price of “targeted killings and assaults, repressive forms of social control, and brutal punishments under its draconian interpretation of sharia” (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 2). Harsh and repressive measures are especially affecting women and minority groups: “freedoms women took for granted in traditional Somali culture have been dramatically rolled back. In many areas, women have been barred from engaging in any activity that leads them to mix with men - even small- scale commercial enterprises that many of them depend on for a living” (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 3).

These two decades of civil war understandably led to a substantial exodus of Somalis fleeing the waves of violence. Although as many as a million Somalis reside in countries around the world, for most, the path of exodus began in Kenya. With the comparable stability of the independent (but unrecognized) Somaliland Republic in the north and the great intensity of the fighting in the south, combined with Kenya’s proximity and relative stability (as compared with Ethiopia) – not to mention the large Somali population in Northeastern Kenya and the relative ease of transport into that region for Somalis – it

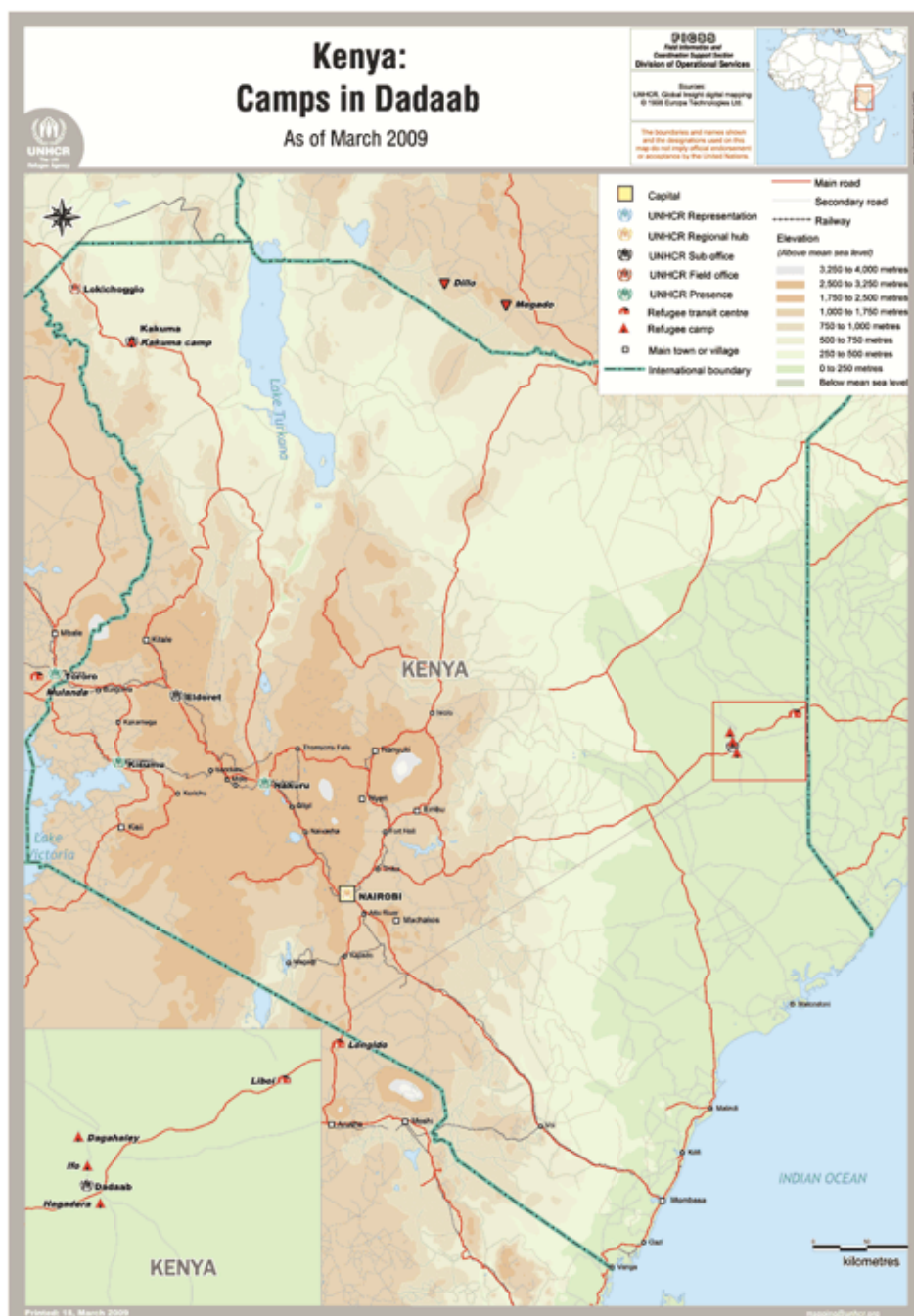
made sense that so many Somalis attempted to find refuge there. The largest number came to be settled in refugee camps in Dadaab.

Dadaab: The Establishment

Prior to 1991, Dadaab was a small and insignificant town with a population of about five thousand. Three camps were rapidly established to accommodate the Somali refugees there in 1991-92. Ifo was built first, and Dagahaley and Hagadera followed in March and June 1992. In addition to the refugees, the camps attracted pastoral communities who were interested in using the water resources, buying food at low prices and selling cattle and milk (Horst, 2006).

The Dadaab area now has electric supply, a running water system, and a slaughterhouse for its population (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000). These camps have also brought important infrastructure like health facilities and an educational system, when compared to the rest of the region. The areas have developed to become urban enclaves in the sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped and agriculturally unsuitable Northeastern Province of Kenya (Crisp, 1999).

Map 2.4: Dadaab Refugee Camps in Kenya



Source: UNHCR, 2009

Apart from creating new jobs, stimulating trade and attracting humanitarian aid, the presence of such a big population of refugees has also led to the overconsumption of resources like water and firewood, use of the local infrastructure and attracted increased *shifta* (meaning bandit or outlaw) activity (Horst, 2006).

Refugee camps are often seen as temporary settlements, but in many places around the world, they have existed for decades and have become virtual cities (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000). There are signs of urban planning in the two relatively newer camps that were set up after the initial emergency phase in Dadaab: Dagahaley and Hagadera. The first camp, Ifo, is divided into three main sections and has seventy-one blocks, whereas Dagahaley has eight lines with three cross-cutting avenues. Hagadera has two big compact groups, with the first one divided into eight sections and three cross-cutting avenues and the second is divided into three sections and one cross-cutting avenue. All sections and blocks have section and block leaders, who are elected to function as brokers between the refugees and the agencies (Horst, 2006). Wilson (1992) says that it is normal for authorities and relief agencies to require refugees in camps to organize in artificial structures to facilitate communication with the community. These official leaders are not necessarily the traditional leaders who have occupied visible and highly politicized positions in their home countries. Apart from these leaders, the elders play an important role within their clans and most of the religious leaders also play an important sociopolitical role in the camps.

Image 2.1: Living quarters of the refugees in Dadaab



Source: <http://www.worldvisionreport.org/Stories/Week-of-April-2-2011/Waiting-in-Dadaab>, Nick Wadhams

According to Cindy Horst (2006), the organizational structure in these camps is mostly top-down, with a hierarchy of authority and a specific division of labour between the different parties. While in most cases it is the host country which is in charge of administration of the refugee camps, in this case the responsibility has fallen entirely on the UNHCR and NGOs. The main role of UNHCR is supervision and co-ordination, and the international agencies are mainly subcontracted by the UNHCR to deliver specific services. Agencies like CARE International are in charge of the communication services, education, sanitation, water and logistics in the camps. The World Food Programme is in charge of providing food to the refugees in Dadaab, medical services are provided by

Medicines sans Frontieres, and Gemeinschaft fur Technologische Zusammenarbeit is in charge of environmental activities like distribution of firewood and the conservation of the local environment. All these services benefit the refugees in the camps, and the direct benefits for the host population are limited. All parties involved in the organization of the camps are highly heterogeneous, and it is therefore quite difficult to form a unified and coherent system of communication at the intergroup and intragroup levels (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 1994). The one thing that binds all these different actors together is the aid itself.

Life and Survival in Dadaab

The refugee camps in Dadaab were originally built to house 90,000 refugees, but twenty years on, Dadaab is now home to over 300,000 refugees, most of whom are from southern Somalia, with small groups coming from Sudan and Ethiopia and a few people from Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Since August 2008, Dagahaley is the only site still registering arrivals. Both Ifo and Hagadera have been closed and while the all newcomers get a food ration card, they don't receive a plot of land as the camps are all completely full and they have to share quarters with friends, family and in most cases, strangers. The Kenyan government has promised land for a fourth site, but recently talks have been stalled due to security reasons. According to UNHCR reports, there were still one thousand new refugees arriving from Somalia every week in 2010

Image 2.2: Line of refugees awaiting their turn, outside the Registration Office in Dadaab



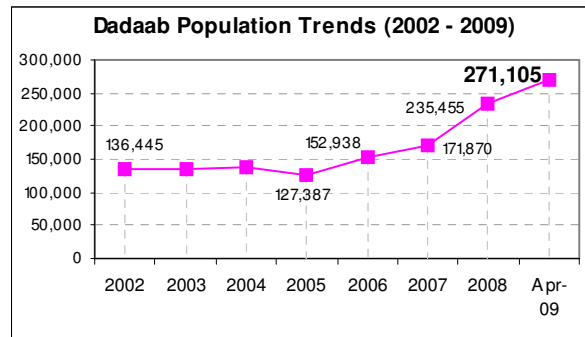
Source: IRIN Africa, Manoocher Degahati

Table 2.1: Camp-wise Population distribution in Dadaab

Country of Origin	Camp			TOTAL
	Hagadera	Ifo	Dagahaley	
Somalia	90,805	85,606	81,566	257,977
Other nationalities	1,925	7,471	3,732	13,128
	92,730	93,077	85,298	271,105
<i>%increase since Jan-2008</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>51%</i>	<i>115%</i>	<i>58%</i>

Source: UNHCR Statistics at a Glance, 2010

Figure 2.1: Dadaab Population Trends (2002-2009)



Source: UNHCR Statistics at a Glance, 2010

There is a limited amount of literature on the lives of refugees in refugee camps and only a small portion of that deals with the lives of Somali refugees in Dadaab. Created in a situation of emergency in order to provide for the physical needs, food, health and safety of the survivors of the civil wars in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda at a distance from the general socio-economic areas of the host nation, refugee camps all around northern Kenya have had tens of thousands of inhabitants for periods that generally last far beyond the duration of the emergency. According to Murphy (1955), the most important characteristics of the camps are: segregation from the host population, the need to share facilities, a lack of privacy, plus overcrowding and a limited, restricted area within which the whole compass of daily life is to be conducted. This gives the refugees a sense of dependency, and the clear signal that they have a special and limited status and are being controlled. Research has proven that refugee camps have a harmful effect on mental health (Hammond, 2006). The problem of idleness dominates life in the camps. This problem, along with the feeling of abandonment, affects everyone, especially those who had a recognized, official job before the exodus, and therefore more men and former

urban dwellers experience a great deal of mental health stress.

It is possible to lessen this effect by shortening the stay or reducing camp size so that there is a sense of community, providing dwellings that are bright and private rather than gloomy shacks, allowing contact with the outside world, and reducing dependency through participation. In the fifty-six years since Murphy's study emerged with this advice it has been only sporadically followed (Hammond 2008). Refugee camps are a major feature of today's refugee experience, and it is impossible to ignore this fact while studying the lives of the Somali immigrants resettled in Kansas City. Most of my interviewees also spoke about the scarcity of medical aid. Due to overcrowding in the camps, there was a high incidence of tuberculosis and other airborne diseases, and medical aid was scarce at best. Many of them said that they would have to go long distances to get medical assistance and sometimes they just wanted to go to the clinics because they were hungry and had extremely poor sanitation conditions in the camps.

Many of the people I interviewed spent more than a decade of their lives in the refugee camps of Dadaab and spoke of the challenges they faced there.

We were all really depressed. Life was hard in the camps and it was almost like a jail sometimes. Children went to school and some of them even went to high schools. Sometimes we had to pay for their enrollment in schools. The adults stayed home and attended classes sometimes. A large part of the day was spent in looking for wood to cook food. With the children in school, we worried about our future whole day. There were more people coming every day and living conditions became worse with the arrival of these new refugees. We stood in line for ration from the United Nations. They gave us rice, corn meal, corn, soybean oil, and buckwheat. (January 2010)

Sometimes the refugees were given buckwheat instead of rice and ate only once a day. They sometimes received a small amount of maize, oil and rice for a month. They never got any meat or vegetables. They had to go out during the day sometimes collect wood in the bush because they received a very small amount of kerosene and wood from the United Nations. However, not all refugees went to collect wood in the bush; women and children especially avoided going because there were frequent cases of rape and murder. Another commodity which was very scarce in these camps was water. Many of my interviewees reported that most days they could not even wash themselves because of the lack of water (See Image 2.3).

Due to the scarce economic opportunities in the region, combined with policies of care and maintenance rather than self-sufficiency, the refugees in Dadaab have, from 1991 until now, largely been dependent on rations provided by the international community (Horst, 2006).

According to Verdirame (1999), the institutions that force the refugees to depend on rations are obliged to ensure the distribution of sufficient food. However, this is far from the reality in the Dadaab camps. According to a report by CARE International (1995), in 1994, when a large number of Kenyan refugee camps were closed down and Dadaab experienced an influx of refugees from these camps, the following items were distributed per person every fifteen days: 6.75 kg of cereal, 450 g of pulses, 300 g of ugar, 375 g oil, 75 g salt and 750 g of a cereal-soya blend.

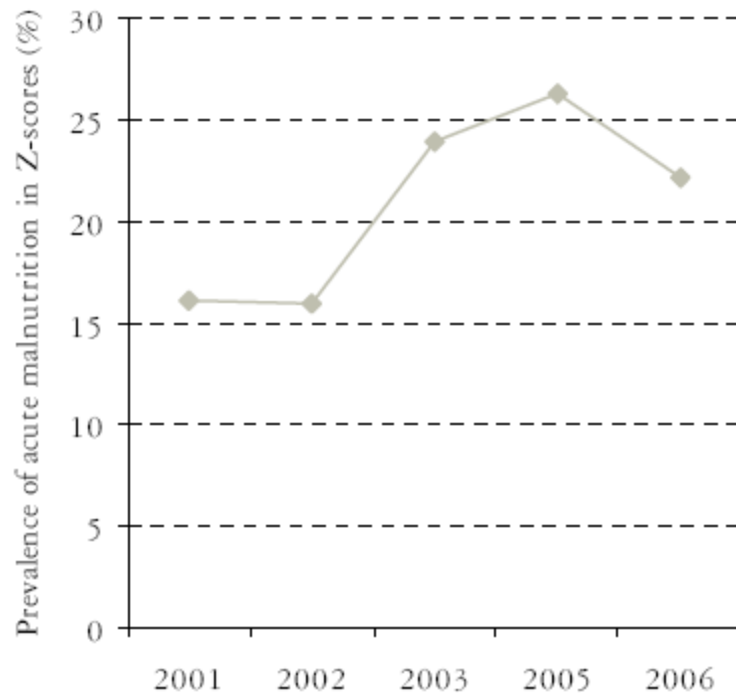
Image 2.3: Somali ladies waiting for water in Dadaab



Source: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/life-in-the-world-s-largest-refugee-settlement>, Anna Husarska

Even though this is a common diet for most African refugees, who receive a cereal and an erratic supply of pulses and a fat source (Wilson, 1992), this diet is insufficient not only in terms of calories but also in terms of its micronutrient content. Apart from that, these handouts do not offer any variety and do not correspond to the Somali food preferences (Horst, 2006).

Fig 2.2: Trends in prevalence of acute malnutrition in Dadaab



Source: UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition-Nutrition and Crisis Situations in Kenya, 2008

This is what one of my interviewees who lived in Dadaab for just under 17 years had to say about the food situation in there:

It was hard to survive there. There was hardly any food. Whole day I thought of how to feed my children. They just gave us crumbs and at times I had to tell the children to imagine that they were full. It was really hard for the children and they would cry themselves to sleep on most nights. In these circumstances it was hard to even think beyond your next meal. (January 2010).

In their book *Hunger and Public Action*, Dreze and Sen (1989) rightly said that the direct delivery of food aid to recipients, which is the model for assistance in refugee camps, is rarely sufficient and often inappropriate due to tackling people's needs.

Another major threat to the diet of these refugees is the policy that states that full rations are only needed during an emergency phase, which according to the World Food Programme cannot last for more than a couple of years. This is apparently done to encourage self-reliance among the refugees and avoid dependency on food aid. This rule neglects the severe conditions of Dadaab, where it is impossible for the refugees to have a supplementary income by growing food or keeping animals. This reduction in rations severely affects the lives of the refugees in the camps. Not only that: the refugees are forced to sell a portion of the food distributed to them in order to purchase the items that they lack. They spend a great deal of time and effort seeking ways to diversify their diet in search of greens, animal protein and condiments to accompany the starchy staple (Wilson, 1992). They also need to need to exchange part of their food ration to obtain non-food items like firewood and clothes.

For these Somali refugees, jobs are hard to come by in the camps. Among the thousands of jobs that the NGOs in Dadaab provide, refugees are employed in a variety of jobs with different levels of responsibility, but no matter the weight of their position, the payment continues to be no more than an incentive, varying between 2200 and 4000 shillings a month. 'Incentive' refers to the money paid to refugees employed directly by the UNHCR or by one of the partners in the camps. Such incentives do not correspond to

salaries paid to Kenyans for the same job, because it is said that in that case, refugees would require a work permit from the Kenyan authorities (Verdirame, 1999). This causes a lot of frustration, especially when the refugees compare their work with that of the regularly paid Kenyan staff.

According to Horst (2006) the search for a livelihood is further complicated by the fact that the Somali refugees are forced into the ‘informal sector’, because their economic activities are considered ‘illegal’, given the fact that they are not granted work permits. This reality is contrary to Articles 17 and 18 of the 1951 Convention, which provide that refugees should be allowed to engage in wage-earning employment and in agriculture, industry, handicrafts and commerce. They should also be allowed to establish commercial and industrial companies (Verdirame 1999). This is because the Kenyan government assumes that the refugees will eventually go back to their own countries. According to Kibreab (1999), regardless of their location and length of stay in countries of asylum, refugees in Africa are treated as temporary guests. Therefore, the government of Kenya also prefers to see the refugees in camps and penalizes any initiative by the refugees to invest or settle outside the camps (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000). The fact that they are not integrated into the local economy in terms of benefits or obligations substantially limits their options in regard to securing a livelihood, since success with livelihood strategies requires refugee access to markets and resources (Wilson, 1992). These limiting political factors threaten the well-being of the refugees. Besides that, their location in the Dadaab camps complicates the attempts of the Somali refugees to secure a livelihood. It is common for refugee populations to be concentrated

in camps that are located in ecologically marginal areas. In this case, economic opportunities are not only rare for the refugees, but there is high competition for jobs even among the Kenyans residing in this area.

The NGOs in Dadaab have tried to promote income-generating activities in the camps like mat and basket weaving, soap production and shoe making but these projects have had a rather limited impact (Horst, 2006). According to Wilson (1992), it is probably more effective to support refugees' own institutions, and one way of doing this is through providing small loans, which seems to have really assisted the refugees in Dadaab.

From 1997, CARE provided cash and materials for small-scale refugee initiatives that enabled groups of refugees to start up a small business or craft activity. Within the community itself, 'money go round' systems exist, especially among women, which allow individuals with enough money to invest in income-generating activities. Some of the income generating activities that they undertake are baking and selling bread, and samboosa (meat pies) in the market place. The competition with local Somalis is fierce, and many of the refugees have adapted to a market of less well-to-do customers by selling goods in small quantities, such as individual packets of detergent, single tea bags and cigarettes (Perouse de Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000).

There are some income-generating activities, which do not need any financial investment at all. Some families have their daughters working as maids for others, and this provides them with a supplementary income of about three hundred shillings a month. A handful

of Somali refugees are also engaged in cattle rearing, and early every morning hundreds of goats are collected and taken out to graze by men and young boys. They are brought back to their owners in the evenings; owners in turn pay the herders a small monthly fee for their herding services. The returns on this kind of labour are typically low, but the precarious situation of the refugees demands that they engage in these activities (Wilson, 1992). Some women go into the surrounding areas to collect firewood for their own consumption as well as for sale, although this brings very little profit and involves great physical risks.

Apart from economic insecurity, Somali refugees in Dadaab face different types of severe physical insecurities, and the main reason behind this is the fact that there is actually no proper legal basis for protecting refugees in Kenya and they are expected to remain in the refugee camps. They lack a clear legal status and do not even have identity cards (Crisp, 1999). They are sometimes given a 'protection letter' by the UNHCR, which is an A4 size photocopy paper with the passport size photo of the 'asylum seeker'. According to Verdirame (1999), the government has not officially recognized this document and it is essentially devoid of any legal significance. Therefore, the Kenyan police treat this document with complete disregard whenever the refugees are found outside the camps, and there have been several reports of the police actually carrying out atrocities on the refugees. Apart from that, the location of the Dadaab camps is a problem in itself. This is an area which was until recently under emergency law and has a lot of *shifta* (bandits/outlaws) activity, both in opposition to the Kenyan government as well as in the form of regular banditry with a criminal motive. Therefore, occurrences of rape, armed

attacks by *shifta*, clan conflicts and individual conflicts are rather common in the Dadaab area (Horst, 2006).

With scarcely any jobs available for a supplementary income, women and children often undertake risky activities like looking for firewood in the bushes or herding goats, and they run the risk of being raped or murdered by the *shifta*. One of my interviewees, a 60 year old matriarch who got to the US with her five children and a grandchild, told me about the plight of her 27 year-old widowed daughter (now in Minneapolis), while collecting firewood:

My daughter did not have any income and her son was really young. She used to collect firewood from the bushes, which she would sell to buy food for her child. One day, 3 men who were carrying guns raped her in the bushes. She bled for 2 months and did not receive any medical aid. She could never go back to collect firewood again and her child often had no food (December, 2009).

At that point, I had could not bring myself to ask any more questions. This was her way of letting me know how severe the physical insecurities are in Dadaab. According to the Somali women I have interviewed, it is difficult for outsiders to know the severity or magnitude of the situation because, most of the time, these incidents are not reported for fear of stigma or even retribution. This particular incident was not reported either, and my interviewee said that the only reason she told me this story was because I did not know her daughter; she agreed to let me include this in my dissertation because I told her that I

would not use any names. She said that her entire family would not be able to show their faces in the community if anyone came to know about this.

Affi (1997: 444) explains: “Unfortunately, the stigma of making a claim based on rape or sexual abuse in Somali society is so great that few Somali women have done so, although some would no doubt qualify.”

In this climate of shame and fear, it is problematic for all parties involved to take action in order to reduce gender-based violence. According to Crisp (1999), bringing suspects to trial, especially in cases of sexual violence, is problematic due to a number of factors: there are no effective witness protection arrangements, people fear revenge attacks and victims of rape are ashamed of what they have gone through. Rape is a common experience in these refugee camps, which provide little security for women. Measures were taken in Dadaab through the ‘Firewood Project’ by Gemeinschaft für Technologische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ: the German development agency) with funding from the United States government.

It involved regular distribution of firewood, with the goal of reducing the occurrences of rape while at the same time controlling environmental degradation and local conflicts. However, according to Horst (2006), there was no clear evidence that rape occurred less as a consequence of the project. Firewood collection is one of the occasions that facilitate rape, and while the rape numbers related to firewood did go down during this project, it went up considerably in other areas.

Image 2.4: A Somali woman returning home after gathering firewood in Dadaab



Source: <http://www.womenscommission.org/blog?start=20>, Elizabeth Beresford

Crisp (1999) explained that rape and other forms of abuse do not always occur outside the camps by the *shifto*. A lot of violence happens within the premises of the camps, and in many occasions rapes are inflicted upon by family members as well as members of the community. Domestic violence involving physical abuse of women, children and

adolescents is a common occurrence within the camps although the exact magnitude of the problem is unknown. A lot of researchers have attributed the problem of domestic violence in refugee camps to the loss of status and responsibilities among men (Schrijvers, 1997). When it becomes difficult for them to deal with the frustrations, they turn to substance abuse and gender-based violence.

It should be noted that women are not the only victims of violent attacks and physical abuse in the Dadaab camps. Crist (1999) points out that the *shifita* that operate in the Dadaab area have four other principal targets: refugees, especially those who have a business or a cash income; aid agency facilities; vehicles traveling in the region and *qaat* or *miraa* (a narcotic plant) dealers. Apart from the bandits, there were stories of the Kenyan police terrorizing the refugees at every given opportunity. As discussed earlier, these refugees are not recognized by the Kenyan government and have no rights as such; this makes them soft targets not only for the bandits, but for the Kenyan police as well. Several of my interviewees spoke about how they would have to pay money to the Kenyan police if they stepped outside the camps. The police would beat them up and take their belongings, and there was no place for them to register complaints.

Therefore, it is clear that the Dadaab refugee camps do not naturally provide physical and economic security to the refugees living there. On the contrary, the camp organization itself serves to exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (Knudsen 1991).

Resettlement

Each year, every country that provides asylum to refugees lets the UNHCR know the exact number of refugees that they would be accepting that year. This number is generally only a fraction (1% according to the UNHCR report, 2009) of the total number of refugees registered with the UNHCR, which then makes the decision on a priority basis as to which family or individual would be sent to which country. The refugees are first screened by UNHCR, then they have an interview and then by the time they are ready to leave for resettlement, they have generally been in the refugee camps for at least a decade, if not more. Then there are other medical and security checks, which take more time. Therefore, most of the refugees that are being resettled today, have spent a long time in the camps. There is a huge lag in the resettlement system and it is definitely not the refugees who decide where to go. After they are chosen for relocation, they have to go through a cultural orientation, which has been discussed in the following section.

Refugee Cultural Orientation Sessions in Kenya

While waiting for their paperwork to be processed by the UNHCR and the United States State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and the Department of Homeland Security, the refugees are expected and strongly encouraged to attend refugee cultural orientation courses. These courses are not mandatory, but attendance at these training sessions is part of a checklist, which includes background

security checks, health assessments, and other assessments, that a refugee has to complete before he or she can be processed as a “legal” refugee.

The US State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration co-ordinates these courses along with the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA). The main goal of these orientation efforts is to ensure that all refugees receive basic information before their departure from Kenya for the United States. The orientation efforts also make sure that refugees are prepared for the changes they will experience during the initial phases of resettlement and that when they do arrive in the United States, they have a realistic view and expectation of what their new lives will be like. They should also understand that while they are entitled to certain services, that they have certain responsibilities towards themselves and the community as well.

The original lengths of these classes vary. Prior to 2005, there were three, five, and seven day refugee cultural orientation sessions, and depending on how long it took to process the refugee, he or she is encouraged to attend the orientation session that lasts the longest as it provides them with the most comprehensive and most thorough material. However, due to cutbacks and resources, the PRM and the JVA have since condensed the classes into three days.

These sessions cover topics on travel, education, finance and budget, and rights and responsibilities. The refugees have to go through an incredible amount of information in a very short time, and according to several interviewees, none of the sessions pay much

attention to the differences that each US state has in terms of housing, education, and eligibility requirements for benefits. The trainers gave them some general information on each of the topics, and even then, much of the time was spent explaining concepts that had no relevant meaning to the refugees at the time; many of the refugees did not understand the information and hence could not ask relevant questions which would have helped the discussions and learning. While most of the refugees reported to me that they learned a lot in these classes and said that they gave them an idea of what to expect in the United States, a lot of them were too old to even remember the main points raised in these training sessions. They were also given books to read, but considering that the majority of the older population cannot read very well, the books really did not help much. Some people felt that they had an advantage because they had already been introduced to life in the United States, either through close family and friends or through glimpses of life through the media, such as on television and in music videos.

Those refugees that were resettled before 2000 mostly did not receive orientation because they left Africa before the refugee cultural orientation sessions were implemented on a consistent and organized basis. Most political refugees were also excused from attending the sessions as they were in danger of being killed or targeted even during transit to, through or in Nairobi and had to get out of the continent as quickly as possible. The Don Bosco Nationalities Center was the resettlement agency in Kansas City then (1975-2004), and they were responsible for conducting the refugee cultural orientation at the port of entry in the United States.

Very often, refugee camps find it hard to maintain their integrity and fail to protect and ensure the neutrality of the spaces they demarcate. Rufin (1996: 28), explains that they can be

turned into training camps for routed armies or the haunts of arms traffickers and suffer internal control by exiled ethnic or religious powers, violent incursion by armies from their countries of origin or strategies of forced return on the part of the national authorities. They can also be transformed into humanitarian sanctuaries: within this framework, a camp can be a rear base open to guerilla forces, protected not only by a border, but, above all, by the presence of a mass of civilian refugees, looked after by the international community, and the refugees may become successively the shields and targets of localized military operations, even when the great majority of them remain composed of civilian populations playing no part in the conflict.

Several organizations in the refugee camps want to encourage dialogue, integration, inter-ethnic encounters, and cultural learning, while others seek to avoid contacts, perceived as conflict. When conflicts arise, they are mostly stopped by forced return or transfers to another camp. The policing of an emergency situation is very poor, if at all present, and this makes these refugee camps spaces of pure waiting.

According to almost all of my interviewees, the cultural orientation sessions that they had back in Kenya lacked in content, depth, and specificity. They complained that a large part of who the refugees were and how they got to be refugees was totally neglected in the refugee cultural orientation sessions. A number of the Somalis I met in Kansas City told me how they had to learn to adapt, grow and continue with their lives while escaping the horrors in Somalia. This resilience and self-sufficiency could have been tapped into, to

provide other refugees in the class with the tools that they might have used in the United States during the resettlement phase instead of just discussing topics in general. If the refugee cultural orientation sessions had been used as a learning environment to encourage the refugees to share and learn the strategies that some of them had used in negotiating a new environment and culture in Dadaab, it would have equipped the Somalis better to deal with the resettlement process in the United States or whichever other country they would be sent to.

The main objectives of the refugee cultural orientation programs, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics, are to provide the refugees with detailed information about life in the United States and the resettlement process, to help them form realistic expectations about resettlement in the United States, to help them be aware of and develop the skills necessary for successful adaptation to their new society and to address the refugees' concerns and questions before their departure for the United States. While these may have been the original goals, most of my interviews freely admitted that they did not think that the goals were realized. They noted that the cultural orientation sessions presented too much general information within a short period of time which hardly allowed the refugees any time to absorb and retain the material.

The refugee cultural orientation program is set up on the premise that the refugees being resettled in a new country have a much better chance of adapting and assimilating successfully if they acquire information concerning the host country and receiving society before arrival. My interviewees also said that new, more updated information and

skills would have helped them get rid of unrealistic expectations and would most definitely have reduced adjustment problems later on. Apart from that, in the experience of the refugee cultural orientation staff at the JVS in Kansas City, successful resettlement depends on establishing realistic time frames for accomplishing those goals based on accurate information about resettlement and integration into host communities and receiving societies in the United States. Participation in the orientation process does make the refugees feel empowered, because they express their learning needs and take an active role in the acquisition of new skills. So while all the refugees noted that refugee cultural orientation sessions were helpful, many noted that there could have been more information made available. However, when I asked what that might be, none could not think of other information that they could or should have been taught. Some did note that their orientation sessions barely touched upon issues that they would confront once in the United States.

Conclusion

In order for us to truly understand the challenges faced by Somali immigrants in Kansas City, other parts of the United States or anywhere else, we need to have a clear understanding of the lives they had prior to being resettled. The collapse of the Somali state had caused almost a million refugees to flee the country by 2010, and a large portion of them lived in refugee camps for extended periods of time before being resettled in another country. For me, as a researcher studying Somali lives in Kansas City, it was necessary to know and fully understand their background such as what caused them to

flee, how the lives were in Dadaab, what kind of insecurities and challenges they faced there and how they were prepared by the resettlement agencies before departing for the United States. All these factors play a crucial role in the way they perceive challenges and deal with them in their lives here and also helped me understand the assimilation issues much better.

In the next chapter, I will look at the three main local organizations, which take over the responsibilities from the UNHCR once the Somali refugees arrive in Kansas City and help them settle down and rebuild their lives again.

Chapter 3: Resettlement, Local Organizations and Starting a New Life in the United States

The United States has a long tradition of granting asylum to those fleeing persecution in their native countries. Since World War II, more refugees have found permanent homes in the United States than in any other country (UNHCR, 1998). The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) under the United States Department of State grants per capita funding which provides refugees with cash, health, and housing assistance based on need (United States Government 2004). However, the underlying rule of the American system is a belief that the assistance should be temporary; otherwise it is considered counter-productive based on a concern that refugees could become dependent on public assistance. Although refugees in the United States are eligible to receive cash assistance for up to eight months, those in the Kansas City area are provided with only three months of cash and housing assistance due to a limited amount of funds available to the resettlement agencies: Jewish Vocational Services (2004- present) and Don Bosco (1975-2004).

The primary goal of the United States Resettlement Program is to assist the refugees to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. This goal greatly influences the United States' missions regarding refugee resettlement. The overall objectives of the PRM's Refugee Resettlement Program are: assisting refugees to attain self-sufficiency as soon as possible after arrival, providing culturally and linguistically appropriate employment and support services, coordinating cash and medical assistance with employment and support services to promote early employment and economic self-

sufficiency, assuring effective use of available public and private resources, and assisting voluntary agencies, refugee community-based organizations and mutual assistance associations in developing greater organizational capacity to enable them to take on a more significant role in the resettlement and adjustment of refugees as well as promoting economic development opportunities in refugee communities (Bruno 2011 and UNHCR Resettlement Handbook 1998).

At the federal level, the PRM administers the refugee resettlement program jointly with the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security. These federal agencies contract with local voluntary resettlement agencies and other community-based organizations and provide financial support to partially cover refugees' reception and placement expenses (United States Government 2001). Then the voluntary resettlement agencies and the community-based organizations are responsible for providing resettlement services as well as information and referrals about employment opportunities, vocational training, education, language classes, personal safety, public facilities and services, personal hygiene practices, health care, and information about legal status, citizenship, and family reunification procedures, for a minimum of ninety days after the arrival of the refugees. According to one of my interviewees, American refugee cultural orientation programs covering these topics are supposed to be offered overseas before arrival but in reality, as I've shown in chapter 2, the training sessions hardly have enough information to provide any real help to those coming to this country.

A Brief Look at the Resettlement Policies and the Influence of the Social Welfare Ideology in the United States

The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees limited refugee status to persons who became refugees due to events that occurred before January 1st, 1951, primarily to address the needs of European refugees from World War II. However, the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees removed this time limitation. According to the Protocol, it requires states to agree to apply Articles 2 through 34 of the 1951 Refugee Convention to all persons covered by the refugee definition without reference to time or geographical limitations (UNHCR, 2000). One hundred and forty two countries have signed the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol. Signatories recognize persons as refugees based on the definitions contained in these and other regional instruments.

Most of the countries that adhere to the 1951 UN Convention also recognize the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union (AU)) Refugee Convention definition (1969) of a refugee as “every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order [who seeks] refuge in another place outside his/her country of origin or nationality” (UNHCR, 1997: 52). Regional treaties like the OAU/AU Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration expanded that mandate to include persons who have fled because of war or civil conflict, making them eligible to receive refugee status. With refugee status, one has the right to safe asylum as well as to the same rights and basic help as any other foreigner who is a legal resident of the host country, including certain fundamental entitlements of every

citizen. Individuals who possess “refugee” status have basic civil rights, including the freedom of thought, of movement, and freedom from torture and degrading treatment (UNHCR, 2000).

In order to be eligible for resettlement in the United States, a person must meet the United States’ definition of a refugee found in Section 101(a) 42 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which is aligned with the definition in the 1951 United Nations Convention. Moreover, a refugee must be among those refugees determined by the President to be of special humanitarian concern to the United States, be otherwise admissible under United States law and not be firmly resettled in any third country (UNHCR, 1998).

There are five major pieces of legislation that have significantly influenced the current state of refugee resettlement in the United States:

- The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952
- The Refugee Act of 1980
- The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986
- The Immigration Act of 1990, and
- The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996.

Although these acts contain protections for persons fleeing persecution, it is clear that they were also designed, to help keep foreigners out rather than to open opportunities for entry into the United States.

Social welfare policies in the United States are examined on the basis of their ability to promote and enhance personal independence in the form of individual economic self-sufficiency and to reduce dependence on public assistance. This individualistic framework maintains that individual self-interest, with minimal interference, will ultimately benefit all (Piven and Cloward 1993). The aim of this process of checks and balances is to ensure that there are no excessive or unreasonable demands or actions made by individuals on state or public assistance. Any assistance provided by the State for people in need, aside from being thought of as the last resort (after family and the local community), is seen as an encouragement to dependency and is considered to be detrimental to the growth of both the recipients and the society. The policy also made sure that the state-provided assistance was kept well below the market wages so that the refugees had a greater attachment to the workforce than to aid receipt (Piven and Cloward 1993). According to Katz (2001), central to this individualist ideology is that success and failure are attributed to individual characteristics rather than structural features. Success is independence, a manifestation of virtue, while dependence is relying on the support of others and is considered to be a failure. Failure, if not a temporary situation or condition in the pursuit of success, is evidence of immorality and is punishable (Katz 1996). A host country's social values and outlook greatly influence the public and private attitudes toward the receipt of public assistance needed by refugees, particularly during the transition into the host country. When the refugees' social values clash with those of the host country, there can be a lot of tension between the two groups, thus posing serious challenges in the integration process of the refugees.

Since 1981, both cash and medical assistance for refugees have steadily declined from thirty-six months to eight months (van Selm 2003). Even this reduced time period of eight months has been criticized as excessive by some in the United States. Van Selm (2003) further explains that the opponents of social welfare believe that providing support to refugees (and unemployed American citizens) discourages long-term self-sufficiency and will therefore only serve to smooth their transition from resettlement program benefits to public assistance. When the resettlement programs end and the refugees are still in need of assistance public welfare agencies generally step in. The refugees are eligible for social insurance (Social Security and Unemployment Insurance) and public assistance programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Food Stamps, Women, Infants and Children programs and Medicaid.

The Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement has a number of social integration and welfare-related policies and programs, but they are not implemented directly. As van Selm (2003) pointed out in a survey of public-private refugee resettlement partnerships in Europe and in the United States , the American government's limited public involvement in providing what in Europe are considered "publicly desirable welfare needs" is intentional. They have voluntary resettlement agencies, community-based organizations and a number of mutual assistance associations who execute the various program and policy objectives. This is another clear example of the devolution of responsibility from the federal to the state and local levels. The voluntary resettlement agencies are funded on a per capita basis, but often the funding is not in synchrony with the arrival of

refugees. There is a huge lag in the funding process, for example: funding that is being used to help current refugees is often per capita funds given for those previously resettled. Immediately after September 11th, 2001, when the resettlement program was frozen, there was a period of time when the voluntary resettlement agencies were desperately scrambling for funds. This lack of a secure, continuous funding source for refugee resettlement clearly shows the conflicted relationship between assistance and self-sufficiency inherent in the residual American social welfare system.

Organizations

In this section I briefly describe the background and functions of the three main local organizations that help the Somali refugees in Kansas City, as a result of the above process of devolution of refugee assistance responsibilities to local institutions.

Jewish Vocational Services

Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) is the organization contracted by the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) for resettling Somalis and other refugees in Kansas City. JVS was originally established in 1949 to assist Holocaust survivors, refugees, and displaced persons build new lives in this country. Then in January 2004, the Jewish Vocational Service Center for New Americans assumed the responsibility of refugee resettlement in western Missouri - a service that had been administered by the Don Bosco Nationalities Center from 1975 until January 2004 (www.jvskc.org). Although they are funded by both Government agencies and private institutions, according to an interview I conducted with a caseworker in JVS (personal communication April 2009), their main funding comes from the following government agencies:

- Clay County Developmental Disabilities Resource Board
- Empowering Individuals Through Advocacy and Support (EITAS)
- Full Employment Council (FEC)
- Kansas Department of Health & Environment
- KS Dept. of Social & Rehabilitation Services
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Kansas Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Local Investment Commission (LINC)
- Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
- Missouri Division of Family Services
- Missouri Dept. of Vocational Rehabilitation
- US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

The USCRI is the primary funding agency for JVS Center for New Americans, which is the home of the JVS Resettlement Program, formally known as the Nationalities Center when operated by the Don Bosco Center. The JVS Resettlement Program is trained to assist refugees from any country, and so far it has resettled refugees not only from Somalia, but also from Liberia, Sudan, Cuba, Burundi, Vietnam and many other countries around the world (Personal communication, April 2009).

JVS, as the agency, which resettles Somalis in the Kansas City area, is the first and only contact for the Somali refugees for the first few months in the city, and sometimes the only contact in the country. They are the premier resettlement agency for western Missouri and eastern Kansas and it is the responsibility of the Center for New Americans to meet and welcome the newly arrived refugees at the airport, welcome them to their new country, find and move them into subsidized apartments (they would ideally be settled in public housing, but that is not always available), hold orientation workshops to familiarize them with the American culture, help them understand their rights and the

laws in this country and assist them in finding jobs and becoming more self-reliable. All these refugees are either fleeing war torn countries or leaving refugee camps where they have lived for several years. They come to this country with very little or no personal possessions, have limited or no English language skills and do not have any support system. Without JVS, they typically do not have anywhere to turn to during their first few months in this new country.

JVS provides the following services to newly arrived refugees:

- Case management
- Citizenship classes
- Transitional cash assistance
- Pre-drivers education
- Clothing, housewares and furniture
- Health benefits
- Transportation assistance
- Employment services
- Relationship enhancement classes (personal communication, April 2009)

JVS also provides specialized employment finding services to the Somalis and other new refugees through the JVS Refugee Employment Program. This Program is federally funded through the Missouri Division of Family Services/Refugee Department. They provide the refugees with: in-depth employment orientation, vocational assessment, employment planning, job readiness training, transportation, job placement, case management, interpreter services, job upgrades, follow-up services, and mediation and resolution of culture-related work issues. These services are provided at the downtown JVS location, employment sites, and training in satellite locations.

Since becoming one of the seven chosen sites of U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants across the nation in 2006, JVS was asked to provide a family strengthening program to refugees and immigrants in the Kansas City metropolitan area. They use an internationally recognized adaptive model to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the diverse refugee and immigrant populations from Somalia, Sudan, Burma, Bhutan, Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Iran, Liberia, Mauritania and Nigeria.

Over the years, JVS modified the program to reflect the employment needs of new refugees who now use to skills learned from the training to retain employment and maintain excellent work history while increasing their productivity. This shows that an employee from a stable and happy home is a more productive employee.

JVS Immigration Counseling Services assists refugees and immigrants in changing or adjusting their status in the United States, offering a wide variety of paralegal services to those who are trying to navigate through the sometimes intimidating and complicated procedures necessary to achieve United States citizenship. The demand for immigration services in Kansas City and its surrounding areas is great. JVS feels that by providing these services it is addressing the needs of immigrant communities (www.jvskc.org).

The immigration process is difficult and confusing for the refugees, and the Immigration Counseling Services program at JVS makes the process accessible and affordable for them. The immigration counseling staff at JVS is accredited by the United States

Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review Board of Immigration. Since the Immigration Counseling Services program at JVS began in 1999, they have provided these services to approximately 2500 refugees every year.

The Don Bosco Centers

Don Bosco officially was established on September 8, 1940. It was first started to provide a safe place for the children of new Italian immigrants to Kansas City in the late 1930s. The local Italian community helped with money, labour and property to build the first Don Bosco Community Center, which became a focal point in the Columbus Park and northeast neighborhoods of Kansas City (Personal communication, May 2009).

The community saw many changes over the years as new people from different backgrounds moved into the Columbus Park and Northeast areas, many of whom were displaced Europeans. Don Bosco began offering English classes and other assistance to these new immigrants. Then in the 1960s, Don Bosco became involved in the Vietnamese Refugee Resettlement Program, which in 1975, evolved into the agency's Nationalities Center (the Center transferred to JVS in January 2004). Remnants of the Nationalities Center remained at Don Bosco in the form of the English as a Second Language Center (www.donbosco.org). In 1974, the Senior Center was created, and in 1990, ground was broken for a dedicated building. Also, 1990 saw the addition of the Counseling and Family Support Centers. Most recently, the Charter High School was established in 2000.

Over the decades, Don Bosco continued to offer youth programs through its original Youth Development Center.

Over 70 years, Don Bosco has evolved into six interrelated centers out of which only one namely the English as a Second Language (ESL) Center, now serves the Somali refugees. The Don Bosco ESL Center has been teaching English to new Americans for over 30 years. In 2010, the Center celebrated its 50,000th student. Students have come from countries all over the world, including Somalia, Bosnia, Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Mexico, Russia, Sudan and many others. According to the staff at the ESL Center, helping these refugees build language skills not only benefits the individual, but the entire Greater Kansas City community (www.donbosco.org).

The Don Bosco ESL Center provides free English classes to new Americans. This ESL program, which is offered in partnership with Metropolitan Community Colleges - Penn Valley, offers six levels of classes, each designed for a different level of proficiency. All students are tested at registration to determine their English proficiency level, and then enrolled in the appropriate class. In addition to English, this curriculum is designed to teach the aspects of American daily life, culture, and traditions to the refugees (Personal communication May 2009). Almost all my interviewees took classes in the ESL Center at Don Bosco and some continue to do so and they have forged deep relationships with their ESL teachers. Many of the older Somali people that I have met have said that the only non-Somali friend they have is their ESL teacher and that they liked going there.

Somali Foundation

The primary goal of Somali Foundation Inc. is to assist the rapidly growing population of Somali refugees and immigrants adjust socially to the United States and to live in economic security and good health by providing services, education and advocacy while honoring its culture. Farah Abdi, Ali Abdullahi, and Mohammed Hussein, all of whom are refugees from the Somali civil war, founded the Somali Foundation, Inc. in 1999.

Image 3.1: St. Mark's Union Church, Kansas City, Mo which houses the offices of Somali Foundation Inc.



They saw their community's dire need for understanding English, overcoming culture shock, and fighting poverty. In the beginning they mostly offered translation and

transportation services on a volunteer basis from their own homes. Somali Foundation continues to offer these services, especially for health care appointments and official businesses such as responding to legal documents and official letters. In 2003 Somali Foundation, Inc. entered into an agreement with St. Aloysius Catholic Church to open an outreach center in the church's facility in northeast Kansas City, and it later moved to St. Mark Union Church, located in the same area (Personal communication June 2009 and April 2011).

Image 3.2: Offices of the Somali Foundation Inc. Kansas City, Mo



In 2004, the Foundation contracted with Jewish Vocational Service to offer pre-ESL and US citizenship classes. These classes have proven popular with refugees. Refugee

women take advantage of their women's programs where they learn about personal financial management, nutrition, and health and safety issues. In 2008 the Somali Foundation began to teach ESL classes to Somali adults and children. The program focuses on the special learning requirements of the Somali population and is taught by native Somali speakers. In addition to that, the Somali Foundation partnered with the Full Employment Council in the same year to bring Summer Employment Opportunities to low-income, immigrants. They provided the Somali Foundation with a computer lab to facilitate job searches for the Somali immigrants in the area.

The Foundation also offers a comprehensive youth program that features a monthly focus group luncheon where refugee youth can learn about issues such as substance abuse prevention, domestic violence and black history. A guest speaker who is an expert in the subjects discussed is generally present and he or she is served traditional Somali food at these luncheons. Somali Foundation also organizes recreational activities for Somali youth and sponsors six youth soccer teams and a basketball team. Below, I list some of the main services that Somali Foundation provided to the Somali community in Kansas City over the last two years:

- In 2009, they implemented a pilot ELL (English Language Learners) tutoring program. This program incorporated First Language Literacy and used native Somali speakers as teachers. They taught 27 Kansas City Missouri School District students and 30 adults in the Spring alone. They partnered with other educational partners such as W.E.B. Dubois Learning Center and the Hope Academy of Kansas City to identify the major problems being faced by Somali students and to help them with after school tutoring sessions.
- With more than five thousand Somalis in Kansas City, there has been an increasing demand for healthcare access services. Somali Foundation, assisting 341 unduplicated clients with 633 visits to area healthcare providers in 2009 alone. They collaborated with Samuel U. Rodgers Health Center to offer its

"Show Me Healthy Women" program to refugees. They provided classes on nutrition, diabetes, blood pressure, mammograms and PAP smears. They raised awareness on healthy lifestyles and chronic disease prevention for the Somali community through new health education programs developed in the Somali language.

- The Somali Foundation has guided youth to academic accomplishments and social responsibility through mentoring and sports. They offered a Youth Summer Jobs Program where ten young men and women took on clerical work, tutored ELL students and helping out with other community initiatives. They also arranged for the Somali youth soccer teams' participation in the Mayor's Night Hoops Tournament in Kansas City and the Somali Independence Day Tournament in Minnesota.
- Somali Foundation organizes various cultural events and civic activities like the first ever Somali Independence Day celebration in July, 2009 to foster pride and positive community relations in the Somali community.

Family and Community Support

It is very difficult to recreate social connections if one does not speak the language of the host country and is unfamiliar with its systems. Therefore, the main fount from which the Somalis draw support is that of their compatriots from Somalia, with whom they are bound together by a common language, culture, and history. All the refugees I met and interviewed resettled with at least one family member and had a sponsoring family. Out of my sixty interviewees, forty were parents who had brought their children with them. Having at least one family member with them during this difficult resettlement phase was a great support to the refugees. The refugees who had children were clear about one thing, that they had gone through this long process of resettlement not because of themselves, but because they wanted their children to have healthy, stable, peaceful lives, where they could dream and make something of themselves, and although at times even

things were really difficult, they would persevere for this one reason. They did not want their children to have lives like theirs.

Some refugees already had a few family members who had resettled in the United States before them when they arrived here, who were a great help to the new arrivals from Dadaab. They were really happy and thankful that these relatives, who had come previously and had a difficult time, helped them and made their own experience relatively easy. They all agreed that their acculturation and adaptation process was simpler due to the struggles of and lessons learned by other family members. Amir's brother Shafiq (I have changed both names) arrived here years before he did, because he was already in Kenya on business when the war started. Shafiq said that he had struggled a lot when he first came here because at that time there was no family, no community to help him.

I never wanted to leave Somalia, but I was already in Kenya when the war broke and I could not go back. Then I stayed in Dadaab for a long time and was later sent here. It was terrible, everything was so different, so strange, so confusing. The place, the people, the schools, the jobs, the smell, the food, the homes, nothing made sense. I hated the weather and I still do, it is so cold. But with time you get used to things. There are things I still don't like, but it is easier now. There are many more Somalis, there are Somali organizations and shops and now I even have Amir here. I still miss Somalia, because that is my home (August 2010).

Amir, on the other hand, had a support system when he came to Kansas City. He already knew where he would be staying, his brother took him around and showed him the city, he got Somali food at home and he already had a job waiting for him when he came here. According to Schei and Dahl (1999), having access to this type of practical and psychological support by family present in the host country has been found to decrease

mental health problems among refugees. It also decreases stress levels which in turn reduces the intensity and likelihood of trauma and mental illness in the refugee population (Valtonen 1998; Rousseau, et al. 1998; Schwarzer, et al. 1994).

Although there were refugees who resettled with nuclear and/or extended families relatively intact, a large number of Somali refugees' social networks had been literally wiped out by war, and this lack of social support caused them to struggle with loneliness, isolation, and marginalization. As Miller, et al. (2002) explained, refugees who were used to multiple social interactions and relationships on a daily basis had a very difficult time coping with their disintegration. Community membership helped alleviate some of the early pains associated with refugee resettlement and is an integral part of the social support and network system for the Somalis in Kansas City.

According to van Hear (1998) and Thompson (1990), social support includes both formal and informal assistance, compassion, and information that are accessible from family, friends, community, and co-ethnics. To have the support of relatives, friends, and the local community also means opportunities for assistance with housing, transportation, employment and also help in understanding and resolving various resettlement issues. It also helps relieve social isolation and can prove critical to achieving integration. Many refugees described how they were helped by other Somalis during their first year in the Kansas City area. They were taken to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get their driver's licenses or were advised about safe neighborhoods with low rents and taken out for grocery shopping.

Bestemann (2004), while explaining the assimilation of refugees from Somalia, focused on the characteristics of refugee social networks and the role the networks played in the achievement of self-sufficiency in a short timeframe. He found that these social networks were critical to the adaptation of refugees in the Northeast of the United States, the host community. The networks were seen as sets of interpersonal links formed by kinship, friendship, religion, and shared national, ethnic, *Qabil* (clan) and cultural origins that connected refugees and members in the host country who had resettled previously.

According to Portes (1995), these networks represented an important source of social capital. Central to Somali social capital is the idea of reciprocity, generosity, or *kharam*. Most Somali refugees noted that in the United States they continued with the Somali tradition of helping family, friends, and neighbours. They spoke of assistance that they would give their family, friends, and others in the community, not expecting financial compensation but anticipating that they would be recipients of assistance if they ever required it in the future. A lot of my interviewees found the emphasis on monetary compensation in American culture strange, because to them it seemed to diminish the importance of reciprocal relationships. Many Somalis felt that they needed to supplement the services provided by resettlement agencies, by providing more comprehensive information to the newly arrived refugees and often gave them an informal orientation relevant to their own experiences in the early days in Kansas City. In some cases when the Somalis felt that there were gaps in the services being provided by the resettlement agency, and major issues were not being addressed, they reached out to help the new

arrivals personally.

Getting a Sense of Stages When Each of these Organizations Step in to Help the Somali Refugees

As discussed above, JVS is currently the USCRI's main contracted agency resettling the Somalis in Kansas City, and they provide various services ranging from airport pick-up of the new Somali refugees to finding them an apartment or a job, and they also help in processing their paperwork for permanent residency and eventually, citizenship. Since they are a government contracted organization, they have to follow USCRI's resettlement rules, which are highly influenced by the United States welfare ideological commitment to "self-sufficiency within 60 days". For the first three months, JVS provides the newly arrived refugees with housing, cash assistance, cultural orientation workshops and job search workshops. They also help them enroll in ESL classes. But the caseworkers at JVS are under tremendous pressure from both JVS and USCRI to find jobs for these refugees and therefore, even though they are often aware of the problems that the refugees find themselves in, they have to give the utmost priority to finding them employment. This often leads to the refugees taking up the first job coming their way, even though they might be qualified for better jobs. Since they are new and under the protection/supervision of JVS and know that all the assistance that they are provided with when they land here comes with a ninety day expiry date, they have no other choice but to take up the job even though that might not be the best decision for them. Then after three months, JVS is not responsible for paying their rent (in the case of refugees who don't get public housing) or giving them cash assistance. They are eligible for food

stamps and can take free ESL classes at Don Bosco, but they would still have bills to pay and JVS is not there to help them with their day to day problems any more.

That is when the Somali Foundation Inc. steps in. As Mr. Farah Abdi, the Executive Director of the Somali Foundation explained:

When the Somalis come here from the refugee camps and are put in apartments, they feel like they are in heaven. Even though you (me) and I (Mr. Abdi) might not like those apartments, remember that they are coming from spending years in the refugee camps where they had nothing. Here they see that they have AC, refrigerator, running water, things they did not have back in the camps and they also get assistance from JVS for the first three months and they are very happy. It is when those three months are over, that the critical time starts (April, 2011).

According to Mr. Abdi and the other staff at the Somali Foundation, once the honeymoon period is over, these refugees often find themselves in a very difficult spot, with no language skills, a very low paying and unstable job, no transportation and no health facilities. Nobody understands their predicament better than the staff of Somali Foundation, who themselves are Somali refugees. The Somali Foundation has healthcare coordinators, interpreters, ELL teachers and tutors during summer, and they generally help out Somalis and other East African refugees with whatever needs they have. While attending the 2009 Summer ELL program, I was told by many Somali refugees that they felt comfortable in reaching out to the people at Somali Foundation for help because not only did they understand their language, they also understood how helpless they feel in the new land. The staff consists mainly of young Somalis, and as Aziza (name changed) said to me, it is a good opportunity for them:

Mr. Abdi gave me a job within my first week of arriving in the United States. It helped me arrange everything before my mother and siblings got here. It is a good job, I educate women about healthcare, talk to them about nutrition and I also get an opportunity to help out Somali refugees, both new and old, in the city. We have youth meetings, conferences about empowering Somali women here and generally helping out the members of the community and making it more visible in Kansas City. I like it here, because I can serve my community, go to school and also earn a living for my family (June 2009).

Somali Foundation is a place where Somalis congregate to discuss the issues facing their community and make plans for the future of the community. In keeping with that, the Board of Directors of the Somali Foundation and some elders of the Somali community in Kansas City had a meeting in April 2011, to discuss capacity building measures and community change for the Somalis and other East African refugees, who have been here for a few years now.

This Community Change that is being proposed would be a comprehensive developmental process, initiated by a core community agency (the Somali Foundation Inc.) and its existing and emerging community partners (See Figure 3.1) to bring about improvements for the targeted population and to empower the targeted population to live, prosper and excel within their community.

Fig 3.1: Somali Foundation Inc's Multi-Sector Visual for Framing Community Partnerships



Courtesy: Mr. Farah Abdi, Executive Director and Co-founder, Somali Foundation Inc, Kansas City, Mo.

With this grant, they plan to complete the work associated with the translation of health educational materials across 13 health topic areas and to make them available both in print and on the internet to Somali-speaking residents. They also plan to expand their outreach activities from 2012 and actively promote the UMKC Wellness Fair among the East African residents in the area. They want to partner with area preschool/Head Start sites in the promotion of healthy lifestyle activities with participating preschool children and their families.

Expansion of ESL classes among persons ages 19-65 is also one of the major goals of this project. In addition to that, they will be opening up new centers for offering ABE-GED programs in partnership with the Kansas City, Missouri school district and starting a learning program with the help of Kansas City Public Libraries. It should be noted that the Public libraries in Northeast Kansas City are used extensively by the Somali youth. Therefore, to make it more accessible to even the older Somali residents, they plan on expanding the library materials, by making them more suited to the English language skills of these people.

The Local Investment Commission has agreed to provide culturally-appropriate child care and child development skills to the East African parents/guardians. And for the children and youth, they will be soon offering after school “enrichment programs” during the school year (this was started in 2009 and available only during Summer), apart from the summer youth program and a mentorship program tailored specifically to meet the needs of Somali and other East African Youth. They will also be provided with opportunities to set up and manage small business operations as a means to earn money and develop business management skills.

They are also in the process of expanding what is called the Somali Community Development Corporation to support Somali-driven economic development, housing and housing counseling, jobs development and other programs within the Kansas City community. The Somali Foundation wants to ensure that the housing counseling they provide is culturally-appropriate, and one of their major goals is to implement a capital campaign to support the establishment of a community center within the northeast portion

of Kansas City, Missouri for the East African community. They seek to expand the already existing Somali shopping center and independent businesses along the Independence Avenue corridor of Kansas City, Missouri, and hope to develop it as an international marketplace of businesses and commerce for the greater Kansas City area.

In addition to these, they have the following initiatives on their agenda:

- Expand citizenship classes and with the Full Employment Council and Jewish Vocational Services to provide culturally-appropriate marketable job-related skills training geared at current in demand careers to unemployed and underemployed Somali youth, with the help of the Full Employment Council and Jewish Vocational Services
- Start a “Friends of the Somali Foundation” campaign to solicit contributions from the community that will support ongoing program operations and special program initiatives of the Somali Foundation
- Establish a Council of Elders within the Somali community to serve as formalized source of information on community issues
- Start an ongoing weekly article written in Somali and English for inclusion on the Northeast News
- Partner with the Police and Fire Departments in Kansas City and Kansas to improve communication with non-English speaking residents and make a conscious effort to ensure that the homes in the area where East African family members live have functioning smoke detectors and are safe from fires and other hazards.
- Offer a multi-lingual information and referral hotline to serve as a trusted source of information and assistance for the Somali and other East African area residents in the area.

Conclusion

It is necessary to understand the functions that these organizations play in the lives of Somali refugees who are resettled in Kansas City, and it is also equally important to understand where each of these organizations fit in, into their lives. While JVS is obviously the most important player and is responsible for bringing the Somalis here, handling their paperwork and helping them settle down into their new lives, one should

not forget that Somalis are only one of the refugee groups that JVS helps resettle in the Kansas City area. Their services, while important and helpful, are mostly quite generalized and not tailored to meet the specific requirements of any single refugee community. They also have budgetary constraints and have to follow strict rules and directives set forth by the USCRI, which as discussed above, might not always work out for the refugees in the long run. In contrast, the Somali Foundation Inc. was set up by Somali refugees with the express purpose of helping their compatriots from Somalia and other East African communities. Their efforts are all programmed to serve only this one community. Since all of the staff members handling the day-to-day operations of the organization are Somalis themselves, they are more sensitive to the needs of their co-ethnics and therefore play a more important role in the lives of these refugees in the long run.

Despite the help of all these organizations as well as, community and family support, the Somali refugees continue to face a lot of hardships and I discuss some of their major assimilation challenges in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: From Somali to Somali-American

In this chapter, I discuss the major findings from my fieldwork with the Somali community in the Northeastern part of Kansas City. I focus on the following key factors that influence their assimilation into the mainstream American society, namely: cultural challenges; language; gender; religion; employment and education; social support; and citizenship and advocacy.

Cultural Challenges

In resettlement, refugees find themselves in a different cultural environment, having lost relationships as well as property from the country of origin, and they long for home (Miller and Chandler 2002). Almost all the Somalis refugees in my research who were not planning to repatriate to Somalia had an overwhelming desire to regain in the new country what had been lost in the old, both materially, emotionally, and psychologically, and create a space for themselves in a new culture. In this section I explore how the Somali refugees attempted to integrate into American society and restore normalcy to the most important areas in their lives: employment, social support, and citizenship and advocacy. In each area, there is a possibility for their interpretation of normalcy.

Traditional migrant literature in the United States has contained stories of assimilation struggles of the newly arrived (Rodriguez 1981; Galarza 1971; Chan 1960). However, contemporary American immigrant literature portrays immigrants and refugees resisting assimilation and instead creating, negotiating, and promoting this neo-ethnic space

(Lehrer and Sloan 2003; Jen 1996, 1991; Mukherjee 1988). Within this resistance, they go on to promote a hybridity that is not just an integration of their two worlds but the transformation into a new entity. This reflects the experiences of both foreign-born Americans as well as that of their children born on American soil. These writers have challenged what “American” means, changing the definition to make space for multiple interpretations where each is given significance and thus, reshaping the discourse on American culture.

As one of my interviewees, Aziza, once said, “everybody in the United States has come from somewhere...maybe not as refugees, but from somewhere, looking for something.” This was a common reaction from a number of my other interviewees as well when asked how they felt about living in the United States and whether they felt a part of American culture. On most occasions, the answer to the second question was a no, but they also went on to talk about their family members and friends living in European countries like Germany and Denmark, noting that in those countries it was nearly impossible to be considered German or Danish, and that people living there for generations who had come there as refugees or immigrants would always be considered “outsiders” or “others.” Therefore, they said that while they do not feel totally American, they do not always feel like an outsider either. Some of them went on to say that with time, they feel more comfortable in this society, but they are and will always be Somalis and would not mind being called Somali-Americans. During my fieldwork with the Somali community, there was only one person, a gentleman called Mohammed, who said he was an American like all the other people living here. I discuss more about him in the next chapter.

The United States has a foreign-born population of 11.7% (Larsen 2004). The United States is characterized by substantial ethnic and religious diversity. There is significant diversity in some parts of the Midwest where many of the Somali refugees resettled, but not all: for example, Minneapolis-St. Paul had a much smaller African-American population historically in comparison to most cities of its size in the US prior to the wave of Somali migration there. Kansas City has a longer and broader history of racial diversity. Nonetheless, refugees in Kansas City felt at times that they stood out, primarily because of skin color, dress, language, and religion. However, they still held to the perception that America is an inclusive country.

It is useful to contrast that perception with the refugees' views of Kenya. As noted previously, all of my interviewees lived for over a decade and some for their entire lives in the refugee camps of Dadaab, Kenya before being resettled to the United States. During the war in Somalia, Kenya provided temporary asylum to about 300,000 Somalis. In fact, it still does, and this has caused quite a bit of stress between the Kenyan government and the United Nations, because the Kenya government now wants to either repatriate the Somali refugees back to Somalia or to have the United Nations to help seek resettlement for the refugees in other countries. Much of this is precipitated by the fact that many local Kenyan citizens feel that these refugees receive better treatment from the Kenyan government and the rest of the world than they have. Most of the Somalis living in Kenya could not repatriate to Somalia because of the statelessness and ongoing civil war which caused them to flee Somalia in the first place and to which they had lost family

members and property. Another reason was that some of them have married local Kenyans and built their lives in Kenya and did not want to leave family behind. Still, many of my interviewees remark on the non-inclusive experiences of Kenya in their lives. On the other hand, this does not mean that they do not experience discrimination in the US. In one of my early discussions of “equal rights” with the Somalis, stories of discrimination because of their ethnic or religious background, or their dress, or even their religion came up. Ali (name changed), a young man who had been in Kansas City for two years, told me a story about an incident that had happened in his first year here.

“I was at the register. An old man came and was of a different colour... I don’t care for colour, but I say this because I think he was not from here. He could not understand the pricing on a product that we sold at the gas station and I tried to explain to him that it was not in my hands, that my manager decided the product prices. But he could not understand my accent or my English and pronunciation and everything and I don’t know what happened. He suddenly told me, “Go back to your country, you pirate terrorist!” As he said this, I almost started crying and I asked him to ‘Shut Up and Get Out!’ I had never behaved so badly with anyone before and even though I knew that I could be losing my job for this, I could not stop myself from saying it. He called up my manager the next day, who then called me into his office and said, ‘Ali, what happened? Why did you say that to him?’ I told him that he could fire me if he wanted, but that man did not know who I was and had no right to call me those things and tell me to return to my country. He did not know my circumstances and just because of my colour and my dress he could not call me a terrorist. I did not know my rights then, so I did not call the police or go to a lawyer, it was an emotional reaction” (December, 2009).

It was Ali’s first encounter with discrimination, and one that came from possibly another refugee or immigrant. While this was not uncommon, many of the other refugees brought

up other instances of racism, discrimination, and prejudice by members of the host community and receiving society. From others' experiences, inter-communal racism also did exist and was based on perceptions and preconceptions of skin color, religion, and race. One lady told me about her employer asking her to take off her *abaya* at work. She is a single mother and with no money or support system, she had no option but to give in to the demands of her employer. She switched to a *hijaab* at her workplace, but after a month, he came back and asked her to get rid of that too. When she cited religious reasons and explained that her dress did not really have any effect on the quality of her work, the employer said something about her "evil religion," which was something she refused to put up with and she quit.

It is important to note that the refugees were not the only ones with preconceptions. They also had to contend with American stereotypes of Somalis. Most of my interviewees noted that while they did not feel any purposeful prejudice since they had arrived, they were often confronted with stereotypes that they found offensive. However, in their descriptions of their frustrations, some of them showed the very same prejudice and lack of knowledge of the culture and living conditions of the Somali Bantus and of African Americans – the exact sentiment which they faced from others:

"The one thing I did not like in the beginning is the way people thought of us, Somalis...They think we are African people from the jungle who don't know what's electricity. They didn't know anything about us, and even when I wanted to turn on the TV, somebody would jump in front of me and switch it on as though I would make it explode – It made me really angry. People didn't know how we lived in Mogadishu... most people here don't know anything

about Somalia or Kenya, a lot of them didn't know where Somalia is, they didn't know Somalia and Kenya are countries in East Africa, they didn't know how we lived, they didn't even know Africa is not a country. They showed me how to flush a toilet...God...like I didn't know that. We had so much more than some people who are born in America and live their whole lives here [in America] like the blacks. But they didn't know that. They didn't see how we lived there, before the war and that made me angry and frustrated in the beginning. We are Somalis, not like the Blacks here, who don't go to school or work, who are poor because they are very poor (January 2010).

Another very important difference between the Somali community and Americans is that while the Somalis have a more family and community oriented lifestyle and culture, Americans tend to lead an individualistic lifestyle. This is really confusing for the Somalis coming here for the first time, and they find it very difficult to understand why people do not live with their parents and extended families in the US. During my fieldwork in Kansas City, I have heard Somalis talk about this a number of times. I have also been asked whether it is the same in my country. Therefore, when Somalis come here with big families and have to live in two or more separate apartments, it is really difficult for them to come to terms with the situation. The thought of living separately from their relatives while living in the same city is really foreign for them, and no matter how long they live here, it does not make the situation any better.

There are feelings of intra-communal prejudice based on skin colour, ethnicity and religion between Somalis and other ethnic groups in Kansas City too. This is mainly due to preconceptions that the Somalis have of Americans and African-Americans before arriving in the United States and the preconceptions that people here in the United States

have of Somali refugees. Next, I look into the role of language in the integration process.

Language Issues

While all the Somali refugees agreed on the importance of mastering English on arrival and the necessity of knowing English for long-term economic and social success, many have pointed out that teaching English to these newcomers is not a priority of the refugee resettlement program in the United States. As discussed in the previous chapter, the primary objective of the American resettlement program is for the refugees to attain self-sufficiency within sixty days of their arrival in the United States. Therefore, the focus is much more on helping refugees get employment as soon as possible after their arrival, rather than achieve English language proficiency. They had some familiarity with the English language through visual and print media and so forth before arrival, and most of the younger Somali refugees spoke good English, and the ones who had gone to school in Kenya were actually fluent in the language even before they came here.

Learning English is mostly neglected in the interest of working right away. People working in the resettlement agencies generally expect the refugees to learn English on their own, through communication with English speakers in the workplace or English classes taken during non-working hours. According to a resettlement official in one of the local agencies, if they cannot master the language in these instances, broken situational English was really all the refugees needed in order to get a job and become self-sufficient. Only a handful of the people I have interacted with managed to work and go to school to learn English. Most of them struggled with this, frustrated with having to work

right away without having the opportunity to learn basic English skills. One of my interviewees, Nimo (name changed), found it difficult to attend English language classes before or after her job.

I wish that first we had the chance to only learn English. When we came here, we were put right away in a company to work. We didn't know how to talk to anyone or to say anything. It was hard, because we didn't even know how to say "Hi!" or "Bye!" Then our caseworker got angry with us. But how can you go to ESL class when you are working so hard? No time! No energy! You cannot learn English when you are so tired, you just don't have time. I went to one school, all the people there were kids. I felt ashamed. I could not learn. I was ashamed and tired (February 2010).

One voluntary resettlement agency caseworker, who was an immigrant himself, also echoed the difficulties faced by refugees who need to learn English but have to work full time. According to him, most of the older people did not know much English and most of them couldn't attend ESL classes, because sometimes they had to go straight to work. Sometimes these refugees have to work two, three, or four jobs to survive, and they are getting minimum wage salary if they don't speak English. So, they have to work almost eighteen to twenty hours a day, just to put food on the table. Apart from that, the pressure on caseworkers in resettlement agencies is tremendous. Their jobs literally depend on whether they can find jobs for these refugees. Under these circumstances, the whole language problem faced by the Somalis takes a backseat. This is often at the expense of learning the language sufficiently well enough, which can not only help the other domains of social, cultural, and political associated with integration but also in the economic and employment domain as well.

The Jewish Vocational Services, like all resettlement programs, provide a referral to ESL classes offered in other agencies or organizations, like the Don Bosco Centers in Kansas City. The participation of refugees in these classes varies largely from case to case. A lot of the refugees in Kansas City preferred taking English classes provided in the Somali Foundation during summer. They said that people who taught them English in the Somali Foundation knew Somali and did not treat them like small children. One elderly gentleman told me that he had not learnt in three years of ESL classes what he had learnt in just one summer in the Somali Foundation.

There were no intensive programs offered by the resettlement agency or other resettlement programs to help refugees improve their English language skills that could prepare them to eventually move from low-skilled jobs (assembly work in factories, in warehouses, or in meat processing plants) to better paying jobs that were more in line with their skill sets obtained in Somalia and Kenya. Most of my interviewees felt that they should have government-supported time to take intensive language classes upon arrival and that would help them to look for jobs more suited for their skillset rather than just look for jobs in the low-skilled sector.

According to Fatima (name changed), an intensive English course would have improved how she was treated here in America and also the type of job that she could get:

If we were allowed to have an intensive language training for four or five months, where we would have to go to ESL

classes everyday for five or six hours, most of us would be speaking English fluently now. We would also have better jobs and get more respect at our jobs. We do not come here to live off the government, we all want to work. This life is a big shock for us, and then when we are sent to work with almost no language training, it is really difficult. Many of us have skills with machines, agriculture, business and other things, but when you don't know English in the United States, you are considered illiterate. That is why we end up working at jobs which are not in line with our skillset (February 2010).

This lack of English proficiency not only leads the refugees to lose opportunities in the labor market, it also makes it really difficult for them to advocate for themselves regarding the resettlement process and social welfare benefits. A lot of caseworkers from the resettlement agencies do not speak the Somali language and that added to the Somalis' lack of English proficiency interfered with their ability to even know what to ask for and so, a lot of them had real difficulties in their first year here. Due to this language problem, many Somalis did not have enough confidence to call their resettlement agencies for help even when they had problems during their initial period in the United States.

The lack of English proficiency not only had economic implications, it also had social constraints. The Somalis noted their feelings of social isolation from members of the host community in Kansas City because of their inability to speak English. The unanimous reply to what changes should be made in the resettlement program was: help the Somalis learn English. Coming to a new country is almost always confusing and difficult; this is made worse when one is coming as a result of being forced from one's home country. Without language, independence and eventually normalcy would be impossible for these

refugees. For example, there are many Somali refugees who do two or three jobs, but when it comes to even going to the hospital, they need somebody to go with them, because most of the time they cannot even explain their problems to the medical staff there. Unlike the Mexican immigrants and Hmong refugees in the United States, who have readily available language programs, the Somalis had very limited access to English programs which were being taught by people who knew Somali. This problem is especially grave in non-traditional migration getaways like Kansas City, and these refugees continue to struggle linguistically until they reach a comfortable level of English proficiency where they could be communicated and understood.

The Age Factor

Refugees from different age groups face different integration challenges. My sample was divided into those who came here as children and adolescents and those who came as adults. The refugees who came here at an early age, integration issues became intertwined with challenges of adolescence. The need to be accepted by their peers and not standing out, which are typical concerns in adolescence, were acute in the younger Somalis. For example, Mahmoud (name changed), who was resettled with his mother, leaving all other family behind, started going to high school full-time within two months of his arrival in the United States, and also started working part-time to help his mother with household expenses. Although he had Somali friends with whom he spent time during the weekends, he was alone at school and at work. Mahmoud had a really hard time adjusting in his first year, wanting to wear American clothes and get rid of his Somali accent, in order to fit with his American classmates and co-workers.

It is important to be like the people you are with. You can't be different. If you wear the same clothes and speak like them, then you are one of them. When you are different, nobody wants to be your friend. They make fun of your skin color, clothes and accent. They would make noises of goats around me or when they would pass me (September 2009).

Younger refugees did not embrace the American culture fully. Almost all of them said that when they had children, they would want them to speak Somali and to be aware of their cultural and religious heritage. Those with younger siblings, made sure that they went to the *madrassa* and did not spend time with the “wrong crowd”.

While it is difficult for all refugees to integrate themselves into the culture of the host society, it is more so for people who are resettled at an older age. Older refugees grapple with a multitude of issues. They take longer to learn the language, to learn to drive, or to learn even the smallest of everyday tasks. Added to that, memories of their lives in their native country, the loss of that life and of relatives, the wait and insecurity in the refugee camps and then resettlement into a totally alien society are too much to absorb. As one of my interviewees, 48 year-old Abdi (name changed) explained,

“We are still Somalis, we follow our own culture, because we grow up in Somalia...spent the first forty years of life there, which we cannot forget, just like that, even though some of the memories are not that good, it is difficult to forget our lives there, because we grew up there. My counselor called it ‘baggage’ and I think she is right” (September, 2009).

As discussed in the previous section, almost all these refugees have to take up jobs in the United States which are not in line with their skill set. It is really difficult for people who had comfortable lives, respectable office jobs or businesses in their native country to come here and work in the manual labour market. Their Somali education is not recognized, and they are not able to secure jobs similar to the ones they had in Somalia. Also, when middle aged and old men and women are treated like small children in their ESL classes, it really makes them feel, in Abdi's words "small". A lot of these people eventually drop out of ESL classes; this further hampers their chances of getting better jobs, and the feeling of alienation continues.

Gender Issues

In Somali culture, all children are considered a blessing from God. However, being a patriarchal society, greater symbolic value is placed on a male than a female child. Traditionally, a strict division of labour makes women responsible for dealing with domestic tasks, from finding and preparing food to child-rearing and water and firewood collection. With so many domestic chores, they are left with very little time for involvement in community decisions or education. Despite this, within most Somali groups, women have always played a significant role in the economy. Traditionally their sphere of influence and decision making was, publicly at least, confined to the home. However, the conflict, which has affected Somali society since 1988, has broken up families and required many women to take sole responsibility for their families. They have had to shed their traditional roles as caregivers in the family and, both in Dadaab and in the United States, these women have had to go out and fend for themselves and

their children.

Somali women in Kansas City work shoulder to shoulder with their men, and sometimes they are the sole breadwinners in their families. Some of the women I have met have held the very first job of their lives, here in Kansas City. When I asked how their family lives changed with this, most of them said that it didn't except that they have had to leave their children with relatives, mostly parents/in-laws/grandparents, during the day. Other than that, these women have to carry out all their household chores as usual, and they do not really have a say in the major decisions of the family and those are still made by their husbands. However, things are different for younger Somali women, who are getting married here in the United States. Two of my interviewees said that they made decisions for the family whenever necessary and their husbands were fine with that. But other than those two women, my other women interviewees (a total of 30 women) said that things at home haven't really changed. A lot of them (11 out of the 30 women that I interviewed) said that they would prefer to stay home with their children and maybe work just part-time, but they have to go out and get jobs because their husband's income would not be enough to pay all the bills (See Tables 4.1a, 4.1b and 4.1c).

Table 4.1a: Total number of working Somali women

Total Women interviewed	30
Not working	4
Working	26

Table 4.1b: How these women feel about working

Working happily	15
Working because they have to	11

Table 4.1c: Change in their status at home after starting work

Feel they have more say in the house	2
Feel status at home has not changed even after taking up a job	24

In most of my interactions and observations, the Somali men were not supportive towards women who work and plan on pursuing a career. I have seen young educated men sneer at Somali girls planning to go to graduate school. According to them, women should marry and have children because that is what Somalis do. A lot of men feel disconcerted when their wives go out and work, one of the women reported that when her husband came to know that she got a job before him, he said “Women should stay at home and look after the kids according to the Quran. All these jobs and studies are for white women” (January, 2010). Also, in a few of my focus groups, the women have spoken about domestic violence. It is always spoken in hushed tones, but one lady told me that men do it just to make sure that the women know that they are still “in-charge” and the women do not talk openly about this because they do not want their husbands to be behind bars. Younger Somali women are not so “understanding” towards domestic violence, and I have met three women who have divorced their husbands for this reason and now lead relatively happy lives. But, as Nimo pointed out (personal communication December, 2009), one has to be really strong to take that kind of a decision, because the

whole family is stigmatized when a woman divorces the man and it is frowned upon in the Somali community.

Somali women also feel isolated in the United States because of their traditional Muslim dresses. While most of them wear a *hijaab*, a lot of the older Somali ladies still wear the *abaya*, and therefore they stand out wherever they go. Most employers do not allow the *abaya*, though the *hijaab* is allowed everywhere, except in one case, which I discuss in the next chapter.

The Role of Religion

Somalis who came to the United States before September 11, 2001 claim that they felt more secure before the World Trade Center attacks. After the terrorist attacks by *Al Qaeda*, the lives of Muslims in the United States changed dramatically. Most of my interviewees pointed out how different they were from the Muslims in the Middle East. They said that they might be Muslims, but that they hated war as much as Americans did. Why would they support terrorism, when they themselves lost everything and were forced to leave their homeland because of war? They also said that in the 1960s, Somali women wore Western clothes and did not cover their hair and were the “Modern Muslims of Africa” until Siad Barre came to power.

As Abdi pointed out, in Somalia, where everybody is Muslim, they were at war because of *qabil* or clan rivalries. People hated each other because of their clans or sub-clans, not because of any personal rivalry. Then they came here and had a happy and secure life

until September 11, 2001, when again the same thing happened. People started hating them, not because they did anything but because of their religion.

In the time after the attacks, Somali refugees found themselves under fire; they were made to feel defensive about their faith, and they resisted Americans' call for allegiances. Many were faced with co-workers who wanted them to "choose sides." Nimo was really frustrated that most people she worked with did not know where Somalia was, and some even thought that it was part of Saudi Arabia. She said that she tried hard to just concentrate on her work and not to be provoked by people with whom she worked. This only heightened her feelings of "otherness" in the United States. She wanted to separate herself from the problems that the country was facing, and she went on to say that it was not her problem.

Somalis themselves had been victims of war and longed for the peace and calm before the war in Somalia. They held these feelings long before the tragedy of September 11th, 2001. Therefore, when people comment on their religious beliefs and get scared at seeing them (discussed in the next chapter) in their traditional dress, they tend to recoil further into their own community, far from that of the host society.

The key to preserving their culture was to teach Somali norms and traditions to the children. The most common ways of maintaining Somali culture in the United States were ensuring that children had knowledge of their origins, maintaining the Somali language in the home, preserving family ties as they had existed in Somalia, and teaching

Islam. Although, this did not present challenges for the refugees, some feared that without active preservation, their history and culture would melt into a more general “American” category, losing its distinctive Somali character. They wanted to create an organizational entity to assist in cultural preservation and maintenance, and the two mosques in Northeast Kansas City and the Somali Foundation help them do that. They send their children to the *madrassa* (religious school) to maintain their ties to Islam and the Somali way of life.

The assimilation of elements of American culture is not confined to those that are positive or neutral. Racism was also integrated into the lives of some Somali refugees. Many of them spoke openly about Muslims from Europe whom they felt to be “pariahs” because they drank alcohol and the women did not dress conservatively enough or smoked publicly. Most Somalis consider these actions *haraam*. They also spoke negatively about Saudis because of the September 11, 2001 attacks. While the Somalis might appear to be biased, these kind of remarks were a clear attempt to distinguish their Muslim identity from those of the Middle East who were “terroristic” and those from Europe who had “defiled” Islam with their interpretation of the Quran.

Employment and Education Issues

Historically, refugees are susceptible to marginal employment – taking temporary jobs or jobs with minimal safety, which are not highly sought after by the native-born population (Duke 1996).

Participation in the labor market is central to a refugees’ ability to be integrated

economically and socially in the host country. In the United States, having a job and contributing to the country's economy and not relying on public assistance are directly proportional to one's self-esteem and value. In addition to providing the necessary income, employment can also create connections with actors in other areas, widening one's participation in other social settings (Valtonen 1998). People who are unemployed for long periods are at risk for social exclusion from mainstream society, considering that for refugees early in the resettlement period, the primary source of steady contact with other groups is usually through one's job (Korac 2001; Valtonen 1994). According to my interviewees, the five major obstacles in obtaining satisfactory, stable, employment in the United States are:

- Lack of English proficiency
- The qualifications from Somalia and other countries in Africa are not recognized
- There is no process for evaluation and subsequent re-training
- Inability to complete their education that began in the refugee camps
- Types of jobs available

Apart from that, there was little support available to pursue advanced studies. This is particularly true for foreign-trained professionals like engineers, planners, medical doctors, lawyers and teachers from Africa.

Getting the first job in the same field or same level as worked in the country of origin is completely unheard of, and disregard for the validity of foreign qualifications is a

common grievance of resettling refugees (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Krahn, et al. 2000). It is seen as a serious barrier to assimilation. Since it is almost impossible to obtain official documents, assimilation into the economic and social domains of the host society is challenging (Derwing and Mulder 2003). The older refugees, who left their home country in extreme conditions, do not have transcripts or diplomas with them, and the process of getting these documents from their country of origin is not only time-consuming and difficult but sometimes impossible if educational institutions have been shut down (Korac 2001). Unfortunately, with no system to evaluate refugee credentials, significant human capital, which should be considered an asset in resettlement, is lost (Valtonen 1998).

The “self-sufficiency within 60 days” directive is the most influential policy in the United States affecting refugee resettlement of adult refugees. Most of the Somali refugees do not have any formal education, and many of them did not have any other work experience except farming and manual labor. They are expected to take the first job offered and often find themselves in jobs where they are supposed to train “on-the job”. Most of the jobs are janitorial jobs, production line jobs and meat-processing jobs. These jobs mired them in low-wage sectors of the job market from which upward mobility is difficult (Korac 2001), especially without host-country language proficiency. Securing a job related to their training in Somalia was central to the refugees’ understanding of assimilation and their desire of regaining a “normal life” in the United States.

A few of the Somali refugees had their studies interrupted by the armed conflict in

Somalia. But by the time they came to the United States, they were adults, and in the United States, if a refugee is a legal adult upon arrival, the primary goal becomes employment rather than continuing his or her education. Refugee employment included formal (salaried, taxed work) or informal (“under-the-table,” untaxed work) work as well as self-employment. Most Somalis expressed a great amount of dissatisfaction with employment in the United States. As seen in other studies examining refugee employment (Korac 2003; Duke 1996), the refugees who were employed worked long hours in a low-skill jobs at very low-wages. Most of them could not afford health insurance for themselves and their family members. For the refugees who did not have health insurance, the mission of keeping their family covered motivated them to stay in manual jobs rather than to leave their current job to try and get a job more suitable to their skills and experience from Somalia. Many Somalis were working at multiple jobs in order to maintain “a normal life” financially, which basically meant being able to pay all the bills and not be homeless. The common trend among all Somali refugees was employment in jobs that were unrelated to their educational credentials. Almost all married refugees noted that they were both working, because two incomes were necessary for survival.

As mentioned earlier, resettlement agency case workers are under tremendous pressure to find quick employment for refugees so that they can be counted as “self-sufficient.” As a result, refugees are often forced to take up jobs that are seasonal and temporary in nature or fill positions which are inadequate for long-term employment (such as employment that does not offer health care coverage and other benefits). The most important charge of

most voluntary resettlement agencies, especially those who contract with the state or the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), is to provide job placement for refugees, thereby preventing “welfare dependence.”

Of the refugees that I interviewed, a few were employed or employed and studying, enrolled in an associate’s degree programs as well as in English Language Learner classes or English as a Second Language classes. More than half of the employed refugees were in low-wage and low-skilled jobs in the private, for-profit and nonprofit sectors. With such jobs most widely available to refugees, in economic downturns, refugees employed in such positions are the most vulnerable to layoffs. A number of my interviewees had been laid off when I had first met them. But they managed to find other, jobs, sometimes with wages even lower than their previous ones. With no health insurance and only food stamps from the government, the Somalis are extremely desperate and vulnerable and take up whatever comes their way. Like Nimo once said, “any job is better than no job”.

Almost all the Somalis I interviewed were in their first or second jobs. Those who had held more than one or two jobs were not doing jobs too different from the previous one in terms of skill requirements and salary. A great many Somalis in Kansas City lost their jobs in the end of 2008, and only a handful of the employed refugees in this group were working in skilled and/or clerical positions. Private sector entities offer various types of assistance to resettlement agencies. Typically, assistance can be in the form of employment, language, and cash assistance, in-kind donations, and capacity building, but

my research found that the most common types of assistance were entry-level jobs and in-kind donations. While the jobs available are not the most stable jobs, partnerships with the private sector companies do produce employment opportunities, thereby ensuring economic participation for some of the refugees. Several local, community and national businesses partner with the resettlement agencies, providing employment opportunities, especially in retail, meat-processing, hospitality and manufacturing industries to the recently resettled refugees. It is the resettlement agencies' relationships with these employers which enable them to find jobs for refugees quickly – usually jobs that do not require English - and sometimes these are the only employment opportunities they have that do not require proficiency in English.

Sometimes refugees who face obstacles in finding jobs in the marketplace turn to self-employment. According to Lam (1996) in response to the challenge of restricted access to economic opportunities, ethnic small businesses are one of the few ways a refugee can achieve economic and occupational mobility. I discuss more about ethnic businesses in chapter six.

Caseworkers in the resettlement agencies recognize and acknowledge the difficulties faced by these refugees in finding employment from which they have a chance for upward mobility. Many of the refugees I interviewed noted that employment in the United States remained a struggle because their present jobs had little prospect of advancement, then there was a severe lack of or insecure health benefits, and often they needed to work more than one job. When economic participation is so fragile,

assimilation becomes problematic and even elusive. Therefore, it is important to look at the statistics on refugee employment critically. Although most of the Somalis I interviewed were employed, a closer look revealed that the quality of their employment was relatively low, and their relationship to the labor market more tenuous than the refugees could have ever expected.

Social Support

Social interactions form a very important part of what enables us to function as human beings in society and dislocation is an integral part of the whole refugee experience. According to Korac (2003), not only were the refugees physically removed from their countries of origin, but their prior networks providing social, economic, cultural, and political sustenance were either impaired or destroyed. Both nuclear and extended families got separated, with some members having been killed in the conflict or resettled in different countries. In resettlement, social support has been found to be significant in the process of assimilation (Lanphier 2003; Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Korac 2001; Takeda 2000; Rousseau, et al. 1998; van Hear 1998). Van Hear (1998) and Thompson (1990) define social support at the individual level as the informal assistance, compassion, and information that are available and accessible from family, friends, kin, community, and ethnic groups. While social support at the institutional level contains the same elements as those in the individual level, it is formally provided by the institutions such as ethnic community organizations, resettlement agencies, public welfare agencies, and congregational entities like churches or mosques (Dorais 1991).

Korac (2003) further explains that a central part of the process of survival in resettlement is re-creating social networks that were damaged or lost as well as reconciling that loss. All the Somali refugees that I interviewed acknowledged majority of the help that they had received during the first several years in this country and continue to receive in the form of community support came from their Somali family, the Somali community in Kansas City (help from the Somali Foundation was included in that) and from the resettlement program and the local resettlement agency, Jewish Vocational Services.

Citizenship and Advocacy

Almost all the refugees I interviewed had a general reluctance to get actively involved in politics relating to American or Somali issues. But this did not mean that they were not interested in what was happening in both countries. While studying Yugoslavian refugees in Italy, Korac (2003) explained this phenomenon by noting that “refugees from the Former Yugoslavia belong to a generation of people brought up in an undemocratic political system [and] their experience from the first multiparty political elections in Yugoslavia when nationalistic parties came into power was deeply disappointing.” Shariff, who had suffered from inter-*Qabil* warfare made a concerted effort to avoid politics after coming to the United States:

My whole family was a victim of politics. I lost friends too. We don't like politics and soldiers who run Somalia. After what happened, I don't want to think or talk about politics, what is going on now...I don't want to think about all that.

Politics has killed too many innocent people in Somalia and it is very, very bad (February, 2010).

Participation in the political arena was mostly confined to issues of permanent residency and citizenship, and staying apprised of politics and current events in Somalia. Of the 60 refugees I interviewed, more than half were citizens and the rest were permanent residents - out of which some planned to apply for American citizenship. A small number did not plan on applying for citizenship anytime soon (See Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Citizenship and Residency Status among my interviewees

Citizens	35
Permanent Residents, waiting to apply for Citizenship after completion of five years	22
Permanent Residents, waiting to apply for citizenship after wars	2
Permanent Residents, not planning to apply for citizenship	1
Total	60

Most refugees said that it was logical for them to relinquish their refugee status for American citizenship because that allowed them not only to get jobs and send their children and siblings to school with in-state tuition, scholarships, and so forth, but also allowed them to travel freely, including traveling back to Kenya and perhaps even parts of Somalia like Puntland (a self-governing and self-proclaimed autonomous region of northern Somalia) and Somaliland, or to other countries where their relatives had been resettled. Citizenship also provides them with an opportunity to sponsor the immigration of family members left behind in Dadaab and Somalia to the United States.

Refugees are eligible to apply for citizenship after living in the United States for five

years. There were two groups of people waiting to apply for citizenship: those that had been in the country for five years but had not applied yet and those that had lived in the country less than five years and were waiting to complete their five years to apply. They are helped by caseworkers in Jewish Vocational Services with their residency and citizenship paperwork.

There was some active participation in the political domain; only two participants described their interest in politics during their interviews. Aziza, a Political Science student at the University of Missouri, Kansas City was interested in both American politics - especially with the Democratic Party and Barack Obama winning the 2008 presidential race, and in politics in his home country of Somalia. Khalid, whose father was a member of the Somali parliament before they fled, spoke about a small group of Somali men who had established an online community that advocated for a unified Somali state. This was a virtual community; and the group does not hold any formal meetings; communication between members takes place online through skype or via e-mail, and they meet up whenever they travel to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Many other Somalis, who thought of themselves as Somali-Americans, did not express much interest in the political sphere. According to Korac (2003) “need and willingness to become a part of the community and social fabric of life is not always associated with the need to participate in the political sphere, even at advanced stages of the integration process.”

The three interviewees who had no plan to apply for citizenship felt secure with their

refugee status, which ensures permanent legal residency and the right to work. Two of them were women, who noted that they did not want their children to be drafted to fight the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus they would rather wait and apply for citizenship until the specter of a military draft had passed. The other interviewee, a sixty four year-old lady named Nasra (name changed) said that she somehow felt that seeking American citizenship, would take her away from being a Somali and that she hoped for peace to return to Somalia and would like to die and be buried there.

Nasra was the only refugee who included political involvement in her conceptualization of assimilation. She told me that political involvement increased a person's connection to the host country, restoring normalcy because refugees would be more likely to be politically active if they were more proficient in English. Although the Somalis here were involved in community groups either related specifically to Somalis or more generally to East African refugee and immigrant groups, most of them had no knowledge of the advocacy efforts of the Somali-American Democratic Alliance, which was a sizeable active advocacy group in the Twin Cities, and the resources that could be assessed for the Kansas City community from there. In addition to that, political involvement could help take an important step towards assimilation by aiding in the transformation from a "they" point of view to a "we" perspective. Aziza explained that to her, knowing English, being able to follow the news, meant assimilation. She said that mastering the English language and then also following and taking part in the life of the government here would be a major step towards integration.

“Most Somalis complain about ‘Them’ and go on saying, ‘They this! They that!’ These people don’t understand that they/we can be part of that ‘They’ and have a say in how things work. We don’t always have to be on the receiving end and then complain about everything. Go get your citizenship and Vote! Go to the neighbourhood meetings. Then again there is the language issue. Many of the older Somalis cannot go to the neighbourhood meeting, because they would not be able to understand what is going on or voice their concerns. Assimilation is not about just eating burger and fries in Burger King or wearing clothes from Macy’s. It’s staying who you are, and also participating more than just existing in a neighbourhood or a city. I see a lot of kids starting to say ‘We’. The other day my brother and his friend were talking about how ‘We’ were mean to illegal immigrants and I thought, Who’s ‘we’? It is really very interesting. I don’t think all the Somalis feel like ‘We’ yet (November, 2009).

Most of the refugees were already American citizens or planning to seek American citizenship and become part of the ‘We’. For a lot of the Somalis, American citizenship would mean they were Americans. Many refugees who were citizens or who were planning to become citizens wore American flag pendants and brooches (worn by women) because they saw citizenship as a kind of lucky charm that would not only guarantee their legal status (their refugee status guaranteed civil and political rights except for the right to vote), but would also entitle them to full membership in the American society.

Conclusion

Although they face a lot of challenges in the United States, by talking to family and

friends resettled elsewhere, the Somali refugees in Kansas City did understand that in countries like Sweden, Norway or other countries of Western Europe, immigration was not a historical fact as in the United States. Aziza echoed the general perception that the United States was a “land of immigrants” and that while it was difficult, it was not impossible for them to incorporate their Somali identity into what it meant to be American. The country’s diverse cultures were seen as a substantial advantage related to living in the United States. Most of them said that although they hated their jobs sometimes, had to depend on public assistance and faced racism, they were still much better off here than their relatives and friends in Europe. Here they could at least try to be a part of the host society and mostly be accepted by them, even though they could never really assimilate completely, whereas in Europe, that was not possible. Aziza said she is a “Somali-American” and that is how most of her friends in the United States see themselves, whereas her friends in Sweden were just “Somalis”.

Since the definition of an “American” is subjective, the Somali refugees, especially the younger ones, were better able to integrate their Somali identities from home with their idea of “American” to form a new identity, be it “Somali American”, “American Somali”, or “Somali living in the United States”. They felt that all these forms of identity were equally valid and accepted, both by themselves and by American society. The reconfiguration of their identity was a major step towards assimilation and the restoration of normalcy in their American lives.

In order to make all these findings more relatable, I relate five stories of five very different Somali individuals dealing with the challenges of resettlement and trying to rebuild their lives in Kansas City.

Chapter 5: The American Experience

Through placing the refugee experience in the wider perspective of (life) histories, refugees are no longer depicted as an abstraction but acquire human faces. It enables a move beyond stereotypes of vulnerability and cunningness, towards a picture of people trying to cope with life - Cindy Horst (2006: 38).

After being torn apart from their families by war and having lived in the refugee camps for at least a decade, if not more, Somalis in Kansas City try to rebuild their lives in the new country with the resources and networks they have at their disposal. I have already explained the roles of the three main local organizations in the resettlement process in chapter four and, as I take this actor-oriented perspective in studying the various coping strategies of these Somali refugees, I do not want to ignore the fact that there are many difficulties that they face in Kansas City. The Somalis are helped by a number of local organizations when they first come to this city, and they also have the support of their immediate family (if they have any) and the local Somali community. Despite that, they face hardships which shape their lives, and as Horst (2006) explains, this experience cannot be seen in a vacuum if we were to truly understand the challenges that Somali refugees face after resettlement in a new country. To be able to understand the trials and tribulations of these people, we should be able to place a human face on these theories, and that is why I have decided to tell the stories of five Somali individuals that I have met and spent time with for over two years. While these five stories do not cover all possible situations that new refugees find themselves in, they should give us a sense of how different the lives and circumstances can be for these people, who somehow are thought of by outsiders as a homogeneous entity with same stories and problems.

Young Girl Heading the Family

Aziza (name changed) is a 24 years old political science student who came to Kansas City in May, 2007. She was born in Kenya right after her parents moved there from Somalia in late 1987 and then moved to Dadaab in 1992. She came directly to Kansas City in May, 2007 with her Uncle's family. She had completed her high school studies back in Kenya and on arriving here she did not have to take language lessons. She attended several job search and cultural orientation workshops by the Jewish Vocational Services and they also helped her find subsidized housing, but she did not really have to look for a job. She says she was lucky to be employed as a health coordinator at the Somali Foundation within 10 days of her arrival in the United States. She was living with her uncle's family for the first few months until her mother arrived with her seven siblings later that year. She had a furnished apartment, a job and even a scholarship for attending college at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, when the rest of her family arrived. With their arrival, her uncle moved to Nebraska and she rented another apartment, which is about a 5 minutes drive from her own, for the rest of her family. Due to strict housing regulations, only a limited number of people are allowed to stay in an accommodation of a certain size. Although they live in two apartments, they all have their meals at their mom's apartment.

As soon as they arrived in Kansas City, Aziza enrolled five of her seven siblings in school, one in middle school, one in high school and three in elementary school. She has two adult siblings, one of whom got married to a Somali man in Minneapolis within

months of arriving in Kansas City and moved there, and another is a 20 years old brother who is the only other wage-earning member in the family. Her 16 year-old high school-student brother stays with her in her apartment. The main reason for keeping him with her is so that she can keep an eye on his activities. She said that being a teenager, he might develop bad habits and hang out with the wrong type of people if she does not take care. She monitors his activities very closely, especially when it comes to him using the computer and watching programs on TV. She has also enrolled all her other school-going siblings in the *madrassa* (Islamic religious school) where they go everyday right after they come back from school. According to Aziza, there is a two-fold purpose to this: firstly, they need to know and understand Islam and read the Quran regularly; and secondly, this keeps them from hanging out with American kids and picking up “bad habits” after school. She is not very friendly with her neighbours and thinks they are troublemakers. Aziza’s neighbours are either Somalis or African-Americans, and when she says she does not want her siblings to hang out with the “wrong crowd” she means her African-American neighbours, whom she sees as school dropouts involved in criminal activities. While this might be true, her attitude of suspicion and distrust towards her neighbours is something that is really common among the Somalis, and it has come up in almost all the conversations that I have had with them regarding their neighbours.

Aziza graduated from college this year and is one of the main young voices in the Kansas City Somali community. She organizes Somali women’s conferences, was one of the main organizers of the first ever Somali Independence Day celebration in Kansas City on July 1, 2009, meets with state lawmakers to voice the concerns of the Somalis in the area

and educates women about their health and general well being. She is a fiercely outspoken and independent young woman who plans to go to law school next year. However, this does not always get her positive reactions from some Somali men, elders of the community or even her own family. Her mother does not know about her law school plans, because then she would not allow her to go for it. As for the elders, as in many other conservative cultures, when young people speak or voice their opinions in front of the elders, they are considered rude and are generally reprimanded and sneered at. I have also seen many young educated Somali men hazing her and making comments like “What are you doing here? Can’t you just get married and have kids?” and “Somali women don’t answer back”. The fact that she is an honors student studying with a full scholarship seems to bother them even more. But she takes all this in her stride and continues to work towards her ambition of becoming a lawyer and helping her community as well as taking care of her siblings. While she makes sure that they do not pick up the wrong kind of habits, she also pampers them and buys them new clothes, bags, shoes and whatever else they want just to make sure that they don’t feel left out when they see the other kids having new clothes in school. She works over 40 hours a week, despite having a full scholarship, because not only does she need to provide for her mother and siblings, she wants to make sure that her mother, who is 65 years old, does not need to work.

Apart from her family in the United States, she has family in Ethiopia, Kenya, Canada and Australia. Her father never registered with the UNHCR and continues to live in Ethiopia, and two of her elder brothers are still in Dadaab too. She talks to her brothers,

her dad, and her aunt in Australia over the phone every week, and she is up to date with all of their lives. All major decisions are made after talking to the entire family both here and in Kenya and Ethiopia. She sends at least two hundred dollars to her brothers in Dadaab every month because, being Somalis, they are not authorized to work in Kenya. According to her, it covers their basic expenses, and she hopes to send more money in the future so that they can invest in a small business within the camp, before she can sponsor them to come here. Aziza got her permanent residency or Green Card in 2008 and will be able to sponsor her brothers and father once she becomes a U.S. citizen.

According to her, the most difficult part of resettlement was the long drawn-out paperwork and security clearance procedure, which took more than a decade for her and her family. She thinks, however, that the education system and settling down in Kansas City have been easier than she imagined they would be. She has both Somali and non-Somali friends and she enjoys helping out with community activities and following international politics.

New in the City

Ahmed (name changed) had been in Kansas City for just five months when I met him for the first time in November, 2009. He was 21 years old and had arrived here with his mother, stepfather and five siblings after spending 18 years of his life in the Dadaab refugee camps. One night in 1991, his house in Kismayo was attacked and looted. His father, a businessman with several clothing and food shops, was killed during the attack

and his mother escaped with him (then 3 years old), two of his elder brothers and an elder sister. They lived in Dadaab till 2009, and he does not remember anything about their supposedly comfortable life in Somalia.

Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) provided them with food, housing and money for the first three months in Kansas City. JVS also helped them with their paperwork, and he got his work permit within three weeks of arriving here. One of his elder brothers got a job in a Tyson Foods chicken plant in northern Missouri. He visits them twice a month and gives them part of his salary too. His mother gets welfare money and his 58 year-old stepfather, whom his mother married in Dadaab long after his father's death, has not been able to get a job yet. Ahmed finished high school before coming here and has now landed a job as a substitute teacher in a local school in northeast Kansas City. He is also a tutor and works in extended day care at the same place. He has one brother who was working as a teacher in Dadaab and is now doing his Master's degree from a university in Canada. He always encourages Ahmed to pursue higher studies, and finally Ahmed has been able to get a scholarship and will be going to the University of Missouri at Kansas City to study software engineering from this fall. His sister married while in Dadaab and is still waiting to be resettled somewhere. He also has some relatives in Minnesota and they speak every other day over the phone, though they hardly ever visit each other.

According to Ahmed, one of the best things about the United States is the opportunities. He did not expect to be able to get a scholarship so easily. He was also pleasantly

surprised by the fact that he is allowed to pray 5 times a day during Ramadan at his work place. However, he also pointed out that life here is not as easy as he thought it would be. This mainly has to do with the monetary condition of these refugees. They are led to believe that the moment they step into the United States, they will be showered with money. Ahmed sends between two to three hundred dollars to his sister in Dadaab every month and said that nobody there would believe that it is hard to earn money here because the stories they hear there make everyone believe that earning money is really easy in the United States - he himself thought that “money grew on trees” before he came here. The fact that he landed here in the middle of the recession with only two people in the whole family being able to get jobs and then too they had to be really careful about the way they spent the money would be unimaginable to anyone back in Dadaab. He never imagined that one would have to pay bills even while being unemployed and said, “The bills never stop coming”. However, things in his family are quite okay right now and he realizes that they are in a fairly good position, and that it could be much worse.

His worst experience in the United States so far happened while he was returning from the mosque in northeast Kansas City one Friday afternoon, when two American girls saw him and his friend, dressed in their native Somali dress, screamed and ran away. Ahmed said he was really hurt and did not understand why anybody would be scared of him. The next day, he and his friend went and bought a few “American clothes” as he put it. His only other criticism about the resettlement process was the amount of time it takes. According to him the people who are being resettled now are still those who fled to Dadaab and started their paperwork in 1991-1992, and there is a huge lag in the system.

Single Mother and Her Two Daughters

In December 2009, while shopping for some Indian groceries at a Lebanese shop in Overland Park, a lady and her two daughters approached me; they wanted to know where they could watch Bollywood movies and buy the traditional Indian clothes that I was wearing. As we got talking, I came to know that they were Somalis who had moved recently to the United States. The lady's name was Fadumo (name changed) and like almost all the Somalis I have met, she loved watching Hindi movies and was more up to date with Bollywood gossip than me. Her English was much better than most of the Somali women I had met and both she and her daughters were dressed slightly less conservatively than the other Somali women I had met in Kansas City.

Over time, she told me that her daughter was barely 2 years old when she fled to Dadaab along with her husband in 1994. Before that, her husband was a small time cloth trader in Mogadishu and she stayed at home. She had a second baby in Dadaab, and a year after that her husband divorced her. She had a very hard time for a few years until 2004, when she started receiving some money from her sister's family that moved to Australia early that year. Most of that money went in buying food and other necessities in Dadaab, but by the end of 2006, she had saved up enough to start her own small stall where she sold some food items and also some odds and ends like shampoo or tea. She had some regular clients, mostly people who worked with one of the NGOs in Dadaab, who bought food from her. Other refugees bought sachets of soap, shampoo and tea from her whenever they had could afford them. She says that she would have liked to go to Australia, to be

near her sister's family, but they were not given a choice. Now after having lived here for over two years she has no complaints, because she and her children have freedom and have never once gone hungry in the last two years. There were times, especially after her husband left when they could not eat more than once a day, and according to her that is one of the worst things about life in a refugee camp. Fadumo explained that she does not care about a fancy house or clothes or even money as long as she can feed her two girls. She is happy that it is one thing she has never had to worry about in the United States because she not only does she have a job, she also gets food stamps from the State of Missouri.

Both of her daughters went to school in Dadaab and they had been teaching her English for a long time before coming here. So, when she came to Kansas City, she could enroll right away in the third level of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. One of her daughters now has a scholarship and attends the University of Missouri at Kansas City and other is in high school. Fadumo got her work permit within a month of her arrival in Kansas City and worked as a janitor in one of the businesses in downtown Kansas City for the first six months and now works in the laundry facility of a chain hotel in Kansas City. Her college-going daughter works as a part-time cashier at a local grocery store and her younger daughter wants to start part time work, once she finishes high school. They live in subsidized housing just off Independence Boulevard, and according to Fadumo, she is lucky to have landed a job that she likes even after leaving the janitor job, and not to have been laid off like most of her friends. She also considers herself lucky to have daughters. Being divorced, she says, it would have been difficult to control and discipline

boys in this new country without a father figure. Also, unlike in Somalia, she likes the freedom that women have here. They have two cars in the house and they can go to almost all places as and when they want. She says that she wants her daughters to grow up and have careers and she herself would like to go to school later when at least one of her daughters graduates from college and gets a job.

The only restriction she has put on her kids is that, whatever they want to do, whether it is college, graduate school or jobs, they have to do it in the Kansas City area. She says she enjoys the community support she gets here and she is not ready to move from here as yet. Fadumo also finds it difficult to really trust people and become friends with non-Somali people, and the only two non-Somali people who know about her life are her ESL teacher and (after almost a year) me.

Father of Four

Mohammed (name changed) came to the United States with his wife and four children in 2004. In 1991, he fled to Dadaab with his grandparents, after his parents, sister and two brothers got killed in their house in Mogadishu. He was visiting his aunt along with his grandparents in another neighbourhood of Mogadishu, when gunmen broke into their house, killed his family and looted their property. Then his grandparents fled with him to Dadaab. His aunt's family followed in a few months, though they stayed in a different block and are still awaiting resettlement. He got married in 1992 in Dadaab and had four kids when he came to the United States. He sends at least \$100 every month to his grandparents back in Dadaab.

Mohammed got his work permit within a month of coming here, but still has not been able to finish his paperwork for permanent residency. When I asked him what his visa status was, he just laughed and said he will soon complete the paperwork for his Green Card. Refugees given asylum or resettled in the United States enjoy permanent residency and they generally have to do some paperwork in their first year to get a Green Card, which signifies that they are permanent residents in the United States.

Mohammed had gone to school in Mogadishu, until he dropped out in seventh grade. It has been difficult for him to pick up English language skills and get a stable job here. Even when he does get jobs, he hardly keeps them for more than a year. When I met him for the first time in June 2009, he was working at a car rental company. By mid- 2010, he was driving cabs, but he recently left that job to work as an electrician for a company in northeast Kansas City. His wife works as a janitor at a private nursing home in downtown Kansas City and all four of his children go to school.

Mohammed was the only Somali male who described himself as just “American”. He said that he enjoys the peace here and he also likes the fact that he and his family have never gone hungry since 2004. But initially he also disliked the fact that people stared at him over here. When he came here in 2004, one of his Somali friends suggested that he should get rid of his beard as that made people nervous and attracted attention. He told me that he thought about it and decided against doing it. He said he does not want to pretend to be someone else and that now he doesn’t think people stare at him like before.

When I asked him why he thinks that is, he explained that by now the people in Kansas City have become used to seeing Somalis on the street and are not surprised to see them anymore. He also does not like the Kansas City weather and finds it frustrating to use electronics. He does not like using computers or the complicated remote controls of televisions. He says he is too old to learn how to use them, and no matter how much he tries, he just cannot understand them.

Mohammed wants all four of his children, three of whom are girls, to get a good education and make something of their lives. But he was quick to point out that he would like to get his daughters get married by the time they are 22 or 23 years old because that is their custom. He said they can have careers and he would support their decision, but their primary job is to have a family and take care of the husband and the children. When I asked him when he thinks his son should marry, he said it is different for guys. If girls don't marry on time, people in the community will start saying bad things about them. He likes to hang out with the other Somali men either in the mosque, one of the Somali restaurants on Brooklyn Avenue or at the coffee shop in the Somali mall on Olive Street and Independence Avenue, in the evenings and during the weekends.

Conservative Mother Struggling to Discipline her Children

Nadifa (name changed) is a forty-two years old mother of seven, who moved to the United States in late 2004. She was a businesswoman selling textiles in Mogadishu and was newly married when she moved to Dadaab in 1991 with her husband and his parents.

They all lived in Ifo for almost thirteen years and then the Jewish Vocational Services (JVS) settled them in Kansas City. They got two apartments, thankfully within five minutes walking distance of each other, and were given cash assistance by JVS for the first three months. JVS also held various workshops for them, which helped them get subsidized housing, get a work permit, learn how to take the Metro, how and where to look for jobs and also enrolled them in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes. Both Nadifa and her husband got jobs as janitors in downtown Kansas City within two months. At that time, she had five kids and she enrolled four of them in school and the one stayed at home, with her in laws.

Initially, they found it really difficult here. The language barrier, the lack of a vehicle and the attention they got from the people around the city were unnerving. Nadifa is a devout Muslim, and while most of the Somali ladies in Kansas City wear the hijab or, sometimes, colourful embroidered abayas, Nadifa and her daughters wear only plain black or dark brown abayas. She does not allow her daughters to wear just the hijab, like other young Somali girls here. Now she realizes that her slightly more conservative dress must have attracted more attention. She also pointed out that she loves doing household chores here because there is so little dirt and it is so easy to clean with vacuum cleaners and washing machines. She is now in the third level of her ESL classes, understands and speaks broken English and also drives herself, which has made her life much easier than it was when she came here.

Nadifa took a break from her job in 2007, when she had another son. She was still nursing him when her husband divorced her, remarried and moved to Minneapolis. Her ex- in-laws are still in Kansas City, and her relationship with them has not changed because, as Nadifa put it, she is, after all, the mother of their grandchildren. Her ex- in-laws get welfare money and food stamps and she gets food stamps as well. Her husband also sends them money every month and she sends some money back to Kenya to their extended family as well. She lost her job in 2009 and was jobless for about four months, when she survived only on food stamps and whatever little money she had saved. During that period and for a few more months after she got another janitorial job, she could not send back money to her relatives in Dadaab. Her eldest daughter, who was about to enter college in 2009, took a break for a year to help the family by working full-time. She now goes to Park University and works part time as a receptionist in downtown Kansas City.

Nadifa says that over the years, their circumstances have changed a lot. While she is happy that her children had the grandparents to look after them, which led them to retain their Somali language skills and culture and also understand Islam, she is not happy that she cannot discipline her three sons the way she used to back in Dadaab. She said that they have become quite disrespectful towards the elders and their neighbours. They make a lot of noise, answer back to their elders, wear different type of clothes and, if she or her ex-husband (who visits them from time to time) says anything to them, they threaten to call 911. She says that she feels helpless and fears that one day the girls will start “American clothes”, get boyfriends and go around openly with them like the people here. She hates these things and she says if they behave like that then it would become

impossible for her to show her face in the Somali community. She is scared because her *naseeb* (fate) has not been very good until now, and she fears that it might get worse.

Nadifa dreams of a peaceful Somalia and wants to go back to the land of her forefathers someday.

Identity

These and other Somalis refugees negotiate and position themselves within social narratives that are not of their own making, and are judged in particular ways by the host community, which go on to define their role as individuals, community members and citizens. According to Somers (1994: 606)

All of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making.

These definitions are founded on particular constructions of refugees, their religion (which in this case is Islam), and what it means to be an American. It is also interesting to see the ways in which the Somalis choose to position themselves in relation to these dominant narratives and produce their own personal stories of who they are and where they belong. This involves a consideration of the ways that individuals claim or prioritize some available narratives of identity or disavow and reject others. But such identity practices do not occur in a vacuum, and are situated accomplishments that emerge through specific social practices which are produced in, and through, different spaces, at a range of scales from sites such as the home, and community, through to the nation and the Diaspora.

The Kansas City Somalis that I met with encourage their children to speak Somali at home, eat Somali food, and celebrate Somali festivals, and the children strongly identify themselves as Somali. However, most of these children left their homeland when they were very young or were born while their families were on the move, and they often have very little or no memory of their lives in Somalia. Their entire knowledge and understanding of their country is mostly through second-hand sources, like the adults in their families who tell them stories about their lives back in Somalia, the elders in the community, family friends who may have visited Somalia, and also to a certain extent media representations. These young Somalis have to position themselves in relation to these public narratives about what it means to be a Somali; these narratives are not of their own making and are often based on differing and contradictory accounts of a place of which they have limited or no memory.

Although media reporting of Somalia largely focuses on statelessness, piracy, civil war, disorder, famine, suicide bombers, and terrorism, Somali parents often try to offer a more positive image to their children of a beautiful country and family life, glossing over the hardships and violence which they, or their relatives, may have experienced before fleeing to Dadaab. Some of my interviewees who were parents admitted that their children did not often understand their homeland and were curious to experience it for themselves, so they plan to travel back to Somaliland or Puntland after they get their citizenship and save up enough money. This will allow the children to get to know their country and its people, about which they have always heard stories, but never

experienced for themselves. The parents feel that these trips would have a profound impact on the lives of their children, that they would learn to be appreciative of life and opportunities that they have in the United States, and that this would also make their new host country appear as a peaceful and positive place to live in. It should however be noted that despite not having any memories of Somalia or not having visited the country, as was the case with several refugee children and youth, they nonetheless continued to identify themselves first, and foremost, as Somalis. The Somalis youth are aware of their “blackness” and many have tried to co-opt African-American culture into their daily living through music, fashion and, in some cases, language.

These identifications look to break the bounded community celebrated in the traditional account of cultural identity. The fact that these identifications are imitative, partial and parodic in nature does not belie the threat, which they are seen to pose to the integrity of the Somali identity. Bauman (1997) explains that within any ethnic community there will be two major and co-existing approaches to the articulation of communal identities: firstly, there is the dominant discourse of culture, which assumes a homology between culture, ethnic group, and community. From a processual concept referring to the ways in which meanings and symbols are mobilized in the context of social interaction (Hall 1996a), culture becomes reified as the property of a distinctive ethnic group: “ethnic labels are thus validated as referring to actual ‘ethnic groups,’ and these groups are defined with reference to a homogenous and discrete “culture” they are assumed, *ex hypothesi*, to share” (Bauman 1997: 211). He further adds that the mobilization of ethnic groups in terms of shared culture is often affected on the grounds of an already existing

“community” (Bauman 1997: 213). Therefore, dominant discourses automatically assume that “ethnic minorities must form a community based on their reified culture” (Bauman 1997: 213).

The second main expression of communal identities is distinctive in that it de-links culture, ethnicity, and community, opening up the possibility of trans-ethnic alliances and identifications, or as Back (1996) and Hewitt (1992) calls it “liminal ethnicities.” In regard to this, Bauman (1997: 221-222) points out the tensions within “ethnic communities” between “culture as reified in the dominant discourse, and culture performed as a process of negotiation within, about and across ‘ethnic communities’.” Processes and dichotomies of this sort are clearly evident in the Somali refugee community in Kansas City and are often expressed in generational conflict and dissent.

As Somalia approaches two decades of “statelessness,” a whole generation has grown up to know a country mired in violent conflict and political turmoil. A large number of Somalis from this era have resettled and grown up in the West. With the wide media attention that the few young Somali men who went back to Somalia to fight alongside insurgent groups (especially Al-Shabaab) have received, the position of youth within the Somali Diaspora – caught between their host and their home countries – has come under intense scrutiny by policymakers.

As noted in chapter one, an estimated one million Somalis of a total population of about

nine million live outside Somalia, making the Somali Diaspora one of the largest globally, proportionate to population size (IOM Report 2009). It should be noted that migration is not a new phenomenon among Somalis and has occurred within the Somali territories for centuries, with extra-regional movement to Western Europe traceable to Somali seafarers who worked on colonial ships in the early twentieth century, a few of whom ended up settling and forming communities in port cities in countries like Britain and Norway (Bradbury 1997; El-Solh 1993). Another wave of Somali migration took place right after Somalia's independence, when Somali students went abroad to study in Western universities, especially in Italy, the United Kingdom and even the former Soviet Union (Bradbury 1997; El-Solh 1993). Later in the 1970s, a large number of Somalis migrated to the Gulf States like Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to seek employment and other economic opportunities stimulated by the oil boom (Bradbury 1997).

The Somali Diaspora is widely dispersed, and experiences of migration and reception differ from one country to another and are different according to the times. This has influenced how Somalis have adapted to their new environments. In countries such as the United Kingdom and Italy, which had colonized two parts of what later became the Republic of Somalia, they joined existing Somali communities as well as other ethnic Muslim diasporas (El-Solh 1993). Similarly, in the United States, Somalis find themselves as part of a wider African diaspora, both Eastern and Western, although they still consider themselves different from other African migrants in that they are both Muslim and refugees. In countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway, Somalis were the first immigrants who were at the same time both African and Muslim immigrants, unlike

the Turks and Bosnians, which often raised debates on the problems of integration and belonging (El-Solh 1993).

The elders in the Somali diaspora have played an important political role, participating in successive reconciliation processes to form a Somali government and also supporting the autonomous governments in Puntland and Somaliland. Their involvement in the political processes at both national and sub-national levels can at different times fuel conflict or facilitate peace, producing some confusion about their contribution to Somali political discourse. They also tend to cling to their Islamic values and embrace their Islamic identity so much so that they find it harder to integrate (De Voe 2002, Sporton & Valentine 2007, Shandy and Fennelly 2006) Many of them are therefore isolated both socially and linguistically. They closely follow the political dynamics of the homeland, waiting for the possibility to return. The advanced communication systems in today's globalized era has enabled the Somalis to remain connected with their home country and in touch with families dispersed across the world. The nature of the long conflict in Somalia has made it necessary for Somalis in the diaspora to maintain strong networks with their relatives and *Qabil*, and I found that they prefer their old and community relationships to forming new ones with members of the host society.

The younger Somali generations that left Somalia as children have different identity issues and methods of engagement with the homeland. Those that are educated and brought up in Western countries, often find themselves between two cultures, without feeling like a complete part of either. Therefore questions like 'who are you?' and 'where

are you from?’ evoke different responses depending on which country they reside in, their relationships with their parents and their understanding of the Somali identity.

My research in the Kansas City area revealed that young Somalis’ understanding of their identities is largely influenced and shaped by their history of mobility. Those who arrived in the United States as children or in their early teens continue to feel the effects of the war in Somalia because it directly affects their families and the ways in which their adoptive country relates to them. In the same way their understanding of what it means to be Somali and issues of *Qabil* structure, taught to them by their grandparents or parents, simultaneously shape and are shaped by their interactions with their family and friends. For other Somali youngsters in the United States, it is primarily their Muslim identity that is the cornerstone of their self-identification. It proves to be an unchanging and unifying identity.

An individual’s identification with their culture can become more entrenched when central elements of it come under pressure or threat, and they can embrace the more controversial aspects of it. For the young Somalis in the diaspora their Muslim identity often takes precedence over *Qabil* and or national identity. However, their relationship with Islam can be different from their parents’. There are youngsters who question various aspects of their faith and actively search for an Islam that is more relatable. While they believe that is important to be a good Muslim, they are also more receptive to the constructive criticism of their religion. While talking about Ayan Hirsi Ali’s controversial book *Infidel* (2007), most of the older Somalis were quite upset. They did not like her;

they thought that she betrayed them and their religion, and some even went on to say that she has hallucinations and is mentally unstable. On the other hand, many younger Somalis said that while they might not agree with everything she says, she is entitled to her own opinion, and that actually some of the things she has written about are true. They also argued that she was not hallucinating or mentally ill and noted that even while having conversations with them, the elders of the community always berated them if they did not agree with their opinion. Aziza once told me:

I don't like it when they treat me like a child. I am 23 and I understand politics, religion and what is happening in Somalia and the rest of the world. Whenever we talk about the political condition in Somalia, if I say anything that these old people don't agree with, they shout at me and ask me not to disrespect elders. How is having a different opinion disrespecting them? Once while watching TV during elections in Kenya, when I said I supported a particular party and person, they all started screaming at me and then laughing at me. I told them, I am not stupid, I am a political science major and I follow and understand politics. But they said, 'What do you know? You came down with the last shower of rain'. How can they say that? This attitude in the Somalis really frustrates me. How can they ever understand things better, if they are never willing to even listen to another opinion? It makes me really, really angry when they treat us like that just because we are young. Being young and being stupid are two different things and they just don't get it" (November, 2009).

The adaptation of the young can also be seen as a form of hybrid identity. Through multiculturalism, the Somali youth often create hybrid diaspora identities, which allow them to identify with different sub-identities. In the United States, they see themselves as having a fluid nomadic consciousness that enables them to embrace different identities –

being Somali, Muslim, black, Somali-American and, in some cases, even Arab. A few adopt hip-hop culture with their Somali identities. Moving between all these identities and managing them is an important element of being young and of belonging. While some youngsters handle this well, others may find these transitions between multiple identities difficult and confusing.

Remittances

As evident from the stories above, sending money to their families back in Kenya or Somalia when possible is a moral obligation for all Somalis in the diaspora. It is their way of showing their relatives and extended family back in the Dadaab camps, elsewhere in Kenya, or in Somalia, that they have not been forgotten. Remittances sent by the Somali diaspora are estimated to be US \$1 billion a year; this far exceeds the official aid to the country of Somalia (World Bank Report 2008). Although most money transfers happen at a household level, they do make an impact at a macro- economic level by supporting spending, which in turn stimulates trade. A part of that amount is often directly invested in business, education and healthcare.

When a family member leaves for the United States or for any other country for resettlement purposes, there is tremendous pressure on him/her to send back money to the remaining relatives in the camps. They often have to make great sacrifices in their new lives just to be able to send money back to the family. Apart from that, there is also a lot of tension within families when they are not able to send money to all the remaining relatives in Dadaab and have to make a choice. Not only does it create stress between the

family members already resettled, because more often than not, they have to forego many requirements in their daily lives for them to be able to send this money, but the people left behind find it difficult to comprehend why these people who now are in their dream country cannot send back money to them.

The Somalis strategize this responsibility of sending money to the relatives who have been left behind, among family members, so that the onus does not fall on one particular member of the family. One of my interviewees, Aziza, sends money back to her brothers in Kenya every month. But that makes her unable to send money back to other relatives who are there in the camps and back in Somalia more than a few times a year, especially for Eid and other religious occasions. However, these family members do not go totally without money, because her family here, her uncle in Nebraska and her aunt in Australia have formed a system among themselves where they make sure that every member of the family gets enough money every month to at least be able to afford their basic necessities.

This is not a new thing in Somali familial relations. According to Simons (1996: 174) in the past, the pastoral population sent their children to family members in the cities to secure education. These children would learn new skills and gain employment, making them able to support their families and this strategy in turn benefitted the city dwellers because it lessens their obligation towards their extended families.

This relationship between family members in the diaspora is not only about sending money, but also about planning how each of them will provide for their families back

home in both the short-term and the long-term. Older family members often make great sacrifices so that the children of the family can go abroad, earn a good living and send back money for the rest of the family who have compromised long and hard for his resettlement.

This kind of planning and strategizing does not only happen between relatives but also within households and families. I have met two families where they send remittances to the parents of both the man and the woman every month. But in one of those families, when the women had to take maternity leave, they could not afford to send money to both sets of parents. That is when they decided to alternate their monthly remittances to each of their parents. They were not happy with the situation as they realized that their old parents would not be able to live as comfortably as they would like them to, but they had no other choice. They are looking forward to completing five years in the United States, so that they can apply for citizenship and then sponsor their parents' immigration to the United States. According to Al-Sharmani (2007: 89):

By making collective decisions who lives with whom and where, relatives across nation states share the burdens of securing livelihood, the rearing of children and younger siblings, and providing care for the elderly and the invalid in the family.

The process of strategizing and determining what works best for extended families is not always smooth and sometimes there are conflicts between family members who have their own ideas about what should be done and how. Not everybody likes the prospect of putting their lives of hold or making compromises after spending years in refugee camps,

just so that they can send money back to those who are still there. As one of my interviewees, Khalif said,

It is often more difficult for a single person. If they have a family here, it is easy to distribute responsibilities, but if you are single the whole responsibility is yours and only yours. You have to work, go to school, pay bills and then think about everyone back home. There is nobody to share it with. Sometimes it can be overwhelming and frustrating (January 2010).

Somalis in the diaspora are not always able to send money home, and this is especially true for those people who have lost their jobs in the recent economic meltdown. They themselves survive somehow with the help of public assistance, food stamps and community, but they cannot fulfill their obligations of sending money to Somalia or Kenya. Yet the people back in Kenya and Somalia might not understand that. They think the United States is the land of dreams and, as one of my refugees put it “money grows on trees here”. They do not understand that most of the Somalis here have the lowest paying, unstable jobs which make their survival in the United States difficult, so sending back money every month without fail can be almost impossible for them to manage. They complain about their relatives “forgetting” them once they settle in the United States and this puts additional burden on the refugees here.

All the refugees call and speak with their relatives in Kenya and Somalia, yet this thought process about everybody in America being extremely wealthy persists, mainly due to the media coverage of America. The pictures, films and news strengthen this belief of

everyone having the “good life” in the United States. In addition to that, the cultural orientation sessions that the refugees have to attend before leaving for the United States show pictures and popular news stories about the life here, which only serves to reinforce these misconceptions. All the Somalis in the camps, especially the younger ones, dream of moving to the United States or other Western countries to lead a successful and comfortable life, and it is important for them to keep believing that this image that they have of the lives of people in these countries is real. This hope is often the only thing that encourages them to go on with their lives in the camps and be patient with the long and tedious resettlement paperwork that they have to endure. The Somalis here themselves do not wish to break the dreams of their relatives back home. Horst (2007) explains that providing an image or keeping up appearances is key for the people who need help while living in trying conditions.

Many Somalis who are not able to regularly send money back to their relatives have to deal with issues of guilt and failure. But it should be noted that the money that Somalis in the diaspora send back does not always have a positive effect on the lives of the people who receive them. Many people become dependent on these allowances and stop looking for jobs. They claim that they are waiting for their turn to leave for the United States or another country and do not spend the money that they receive judiciously. This fact is reinforced by Horst (2007), where she documents stories about people chewing *qat* (a native plant, which has been designated as a ‘drug of abuse’ by the World Health Organization) and not appreciating the sacrifice and hard work of the relatives who send them money. In her research with the Somalis living in the UK, Lindley (2006) found

that although the senders hoped that the money they send would be spent wisely, they could not actually control or dictate how it should be spent.

Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter is to make all the research findings of previous chapters more relatable and to highlight and discuss the two main themes that emerge from the five stories. The identity issues faced by Somali refugees differ from person to person and also depend on a lot of other factors like age, gender, or how much time the particular person has spent in the host country. The challenges faced by different age groups are different as the elderly Somalis prefer to remain within their community and the younger ones, have to juggle multiple identities. In doing so, many of them manage fine, but many get more and more confused about their identity.

The section about remittances illustrates how the people in the Somali diaspora strategize to send money abroad. This strategizing and planning run across nation states between family members settled in different countries and at times takes place within households and families. The problems that people in the diaspora face while trying to provide for those left back home and the guilt that they go through when they are not able to send anything is also highlighted here.

Despite all these challenges, there is a growing number of Somali businesses and organizations in the northeastern part of Kansas City and I take a look at this new emerging Somali ethnic enclave in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: An Emerging Somali Ethnic Enclave in Northeastern Kansas City

Minority clusters can act as safe havens, particularly for recent migrants, offering a place of initiation and familiarization where traditional values, customs and perhaps language are retained. Well-established ethnic enclaves can form an important link in the process of chain migration in which earlier migrants maintain flows of information and aid to later arrivals (Pacione 2003: 385)

The most common forms of ethnic space in the cities of the United States have been ethnic neighbourhoods and ghettos, and while both house minority populations, ghettos involuntarily segregate their inhabitants. Enclaves, on the other hand, are identifiable by distinctive markers that proclaim each community's ethnic affiliation and reflect the cultures of non-host nationalities and ethnic groups. As Chacko (2003) explains, elements of home and native tradition are accessible to immigrants within these urban sectors, which not only accommodated ethnic groups but also catered to their specific needs and desires through a selection of businesses, institutions and services.

These neighbourhoods are the most likely venues for minorities, and in this case, the Somali refugees, to meet their co-ethnics, and they are more than mere backdrops for their inhabitants. As Eyles (1985) and Anderson (1988) explained, these are distinct ethnic areas and their distinctiveness arose both from the internalized sense of place, or identification that embodied the lived experiences of their residents, as well as sites of ethnic or national representation. Irrespective of the type of space they inhabit, people shape the built environment to fulfill their needs and wishes and to reflect their social and

cultural identities (Lewis, 1979). Different ethnic groups mark their neighbourhoods with distinctive ethnic markers like art, architecture, retail establishments to cater to the special interests and tastes of the community, and signage in the language of the group (Chacko 2003, Arreola 2000 and Weightman 1993).

According to Chacko (2003: 25):

While tangible symbols of national or ethnic identity can be superimposed on otherwise ordinary spaces to mark them as cultural places with a special meaning, one should remember that ethnic quarters are more than just special montages of discrete groups and their cultural artifacts, institutions and services. Ethnic enclaves are “places” where community is forged and embodied and in their various guises they are home or representations of home to various immigrant groups, infused with social meaning and cultural and emotional associations.

There is an ever growing and varied literature focusing on the economic, demographic, social and political impacts of immigrants upon major urban destinations in the world (Price & Benton-Short, 2009; Fonseca, 2008; Singer, Hardwick, & Brettell, 2008; and Hanley, Ruble, & Garland, 2008). Within this literature, there is a lot of discussion on the causes that lead these immigrants to become entrepreneurs and the economic and socio-cultural impacts that they have on the urban landscape (Li, 2001; Zhou, 2004; Kaplan & Li, 2006; Wang & Li, 2007). Borjas (1986: 19) points out that the rates of self-employment are higher among the foreign-born than the native-born in the United States, and this is mostly explained by the “enclave thesis” and the “blocked mobility thesis”. According to the enclave thesis, immigrant entrepreneurship often stems from the demands for goods and services from the immigrant community itself. Scholars like Li

(2006), Airriess (2006), Lo (2006) and Texiera (2006) have pointed out that in cities with a diverse population like Toronto, Los Angeles and New Orleans, immigrants turn to co-ethnics in forming ethnic economies. The blocked mobility thesis stresses that the immigrants generate their own jobs and economy because they feel that they have been limited by the host society's employment structure or prejudices (Price and Chacko, 2009).

Similarly, Chaganti and Greene (2002) differentiate between "immigrant entrepreneurs" and "ethnic entrepreneurs". According to them, while immigrant entrepreneurs are recent arrivals who open businesses just as a means of economic survival, ethnic entrepreneurs are those, whose businesses are based on interactions and connections among people with a common heritage. But as Price and Chacko (2009) have pointed out, the distinction between the two types of entrepreneurs is not precise and many entrepreneurs engage in both practices.

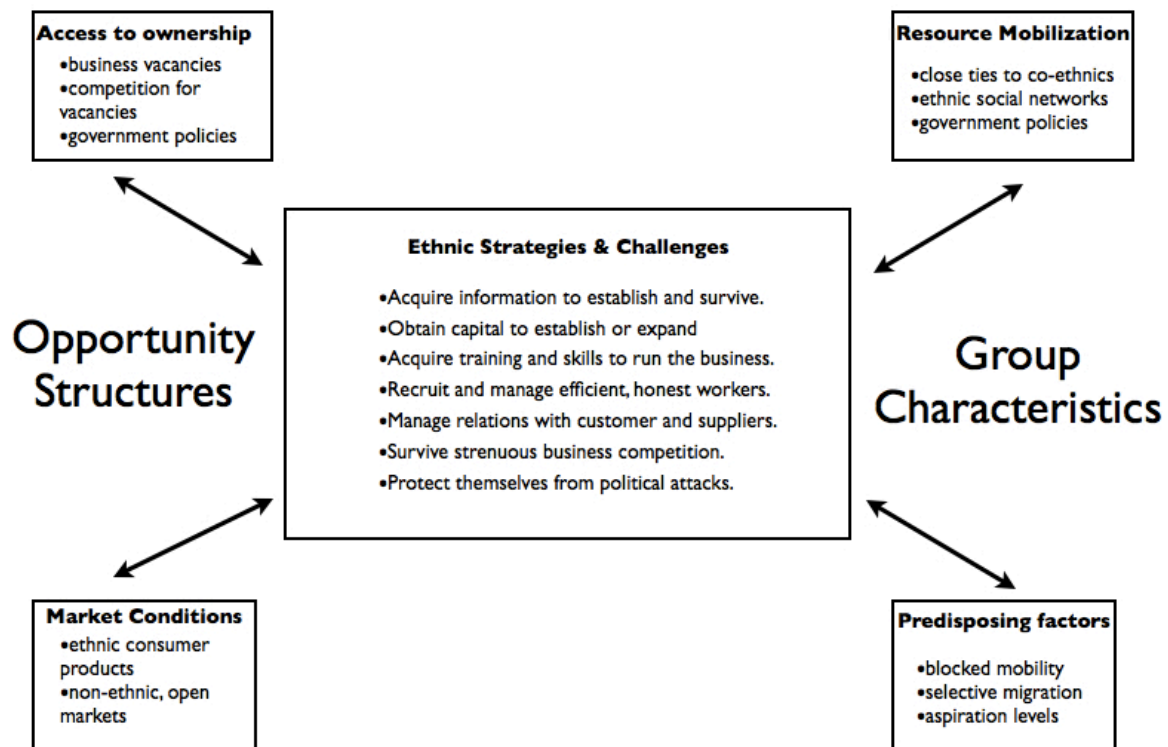
Portes' and Bach's (1985) *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* became a turning point in understanding how different immigrant groups organize themselves socially and economically to negotiate their new surroundings. Portes and Bach noted that under certain circumstances, immigrants create an alternative, unavailable to native-born workers, which they called the "ethnic enclave." This enclave model was the result of a detailed study of the Cuban immigrant experience in Miami, and had the following features:

- Geographical concentration
- Interdependent networks of social and business relationships
- A relatively sophisticated division of labor.

Rather than operating as just another segment of the labor market, the enclave functions as an alternative environment for the immigrant, cushioning his or her incorporation into the host country by providing both community and employment (Research Perspectives on Migration Report 1997). But the most important feature of the enclave studied by Portes and Bach was its capacity to provide the immigrant with a path for upward mobility. It is not surprising to find that immigrant communities take care of their own people and that the handful of those who have the capacity to assist do help out the newcomers by providing apprenticeships that lead to eventual business ownership. Embedded in this observation was a subtle paradigm shift: Portes and Bach showed that immigrants not only brought entrepreneurial qualities with them, but created an environment that nurtured and promoted the development of those qualities (Research Perspectives on Migration Report 1997)

According to Waldinger, Aldrich and Ward (1990), propinquity (nearness of blood relationship) was an incidental rather than a defining characteristic of the ethnic economy. They further proposed dropping the term “enclave” and advocated what came to be known as the “interactive model,” which identifies a wide range of factors such as market conditions or ethnic social networks that generate, encourage, or in some way have an impact upon ethnic entrepreneurship.

Figure 6.1: Interactive Model of Ethnic Entrepreneurship



Source: Waldinger et al. (1990: 22)

According to this model developed by Waldinger et al. (1990) the opportunity structure that a would be immigrant entrepreneur encounters is determined in part by prevailing market conditions and in part by the accessibility of those businesses to immigrant ownership. Some opportunities are ready-at-hand, such as providing a supply to their ethnic community with foods, newspapers, clothes and other culture-specific goods from their country of origin. Since most refugees and immigrants maintain close links with

their home countries and encounter challenges while adjusting to their host country, businesses that service needs such as tax accounting firms and travel agencies, also tend to flourish. However, in order to grow beyond this limited but loyal market, immigrant businesses have to expand, and they generally do so by taking advantage of their linkages with businesses in their home country to supply the native-born with imported and ethnic goods which have a certain novelty value in their host countries.

All the Somalis in Kansas City live in the northeastern part of the city, which has historically been an immigrant destination in the city. Other than the Somalis, this area is populated by Mexican immigrants and African Americans. As Skop and Li (2003: 116) explain, “ a general tendency in the new metropolis is for immigrants to live in areas where they combine with other non-white ethnic groups to create multiethnic communities”. Miyares (1997) further explains that lower income immigrants (like the Somalis) may be forced to reside in marginalized spaces located on the periphery of urban areas such as Mexicans who live in outlying *colonias* in Laredo, Texas and Hmong who reside in apartments and small homes on the edge of Fresno, California.

These Somali refugees stay connected to each other and flourish as a community through activities that bring them to places which have visible elements of Somali material culture and also to places which might not have a visible Somali-ness, but have over time become centralized sites of congregation, where community members meet and discuss their lives, problems and spend time in general ruminating about life back home. Key among these physical sites which serve as ethnic places to the Somalis in the Greater

Kansas City area are ethnic institutions like the Somali Foundation that serve as connectors for the community and ethnic “socio-commercescapes” (Chacko 2003: 33), or areas with a concentration of Somali ethnic businesses which not only provide the community with Somali goods and services but are also meeting places for the community. In these places, the Somalis sustain their ethnic identity and leave imprints on the landscape with visual markers which make them identifiable ethnic spaces.

Chacko (2003: 35) explains that it is also critical to have ethnic places which do not have visual ethnic markers on them; she calls these “ethnic arenas” which are spaces that are often used by the community, but lacking a physical marker. In the case of Somalis, that would be the Somali Foundation, which is located within the premises of a church in northeast Kansas City, and the North Kansas City Library which is frequented by the Somali youth for reading purposes, youth meetings as well as for using the computer facilities that are available there. This also includes the residences that they live in. Even in neighbourhoods where they live in larger numbers and in fact make up the majority of the population, one cannot identify a Somali home from its external appearance.

Like most other immigrant groups, the Somalis in the United States and in Kansas City think of themselves as members of a distinctive ethnic community and they are extremely proud of their Somali identity. They wish to preserve their cultural heritage of the Somali community, even as they interact and absorb elements of the host society. They are aided by both formal and informal community organizations which provide the infrastructure to the Somalis for form networks. (Briggs and Mueller 1997; Zelinsky and Lee 1998;

Zelinsky 1991). Like other immigrant groups, the Somali refugees maintain their ethnic identity by social engagement, and participating in various cultural activities and institutional presence is necessary to maintain this ethnic identity by organizing such events.

Apart from performing the preservation function, wherein the Somalis can preserve their traditions and culture, this spatial concentration also makes them stronger and more visible to the host society. As explained by Pacione (2003: 385):

The spatial concentration of an ethnic group can provide it with a base for action in the struggle of its members with society in general. In terms of political action, spatial concentration may enable a group to elect its own representatives to positions of power within the institutional framework of urban politics.

This was clearly demonstrated by the election of Keith Ellison, who was the first Muslim to be elected as a U.S. Representative from Minnesota's 5th Congressional District in 2007. His election was largely attributed to the large Somali population in his constituency.

Chacko (2003) argues that visual expression of ethnic institutions in the form of permanent structures is important as it signifies the permanence of the community. Although I agree with her, the Somali community in Kansas City is much too new to have such structures. They are predominantly Muslims and therefore attend two

particular mosques in the northeast area of Kansas City. Both of these mosques are attended by Muslims from other communities as well, but out of the two, there is one mosque in particular which is attended predominantly by the Somalis in Kansas City. If we think about their Somali identity, then these mosques might not fit Chacko's description of an ethnic institution, but if we take their religious identity into account, then these mosques, which are run and attended mostly by Somalis, might serve the purpose. Some Somalis have bought the land adjacent to this mosque and plan on expanding the facilities to accommodate various ethnic and religious activities and events over there during the holy month of *Ramadan*, as well as for the rest of the year.

Non-religious institutions also play an important role in building community and helping the individuals from the community to establish themselves in the new environment of the host country. These organizations might have different objectives, ranging from cultural and economic activities to assisting immigrants with the assimilation challenges. The Somali Foundation Inc. a local organization was founded in 1999 to serve Somali refugees in the Greater Kansas City area with interpreter and transportation services. Now, added to those, as I've shown in chapter three, it provides them with ELL classes, health education services, co-ordinates health appointments for the Somalis, helps them with substance abuse issues, provide the Somali youth with a lab for job search, help them build sports teams and play in different leagues, mentors them and also provides them with jobs whenever possible. They have currently received a grant from an Ethiopian organization in Arlington, Virginia and they plan to use the grant in capacity building measures and a community change project, which has been explained in detail in

chapter three.

Ethnic establishments like stores and restaurants also serve socio-cultural functions other than their obvious economic ones. According to Selassie (1996), restaurants and cafes in particular are social gathering places for immigrants, who congregate for a reminder of home

Image 6.1: A Somali Restaurant and a Halal Meat Shop in northeast Kansas City



Most of the Somali enterprises which serve the Somali community as well as the rest of

the East African and Muslim communities and sometimes even the host society are concentrated between Kansas City's Downtown and Independence Avenue in the northeastern part of the city's Missouri side. Recently, the Somali community leased a building at the intersection of Independence Boulevard and Olive Street, which is basically the size of 2 mid sized stores or one really large store.

Image 6.2: A “High end” Somali store specializing in imported Somali goods and money wiring services



The front half of the building is occupied by a large Somali store which has luxury items

like carpets, clothes and other imported materials and also provides money wiring services, phone connections and so on. The rest of the building is divided into approximately fifteen small stalls which specialize in and are managed by Somalis. This is called the “Somali Mall” by the Somalis in this area. One intriguing feature of the mall is that men and women had different stalls as of 2011, and they congregated in separate areas and stalls.

Image 6.3: A store and tailoring shop specializing only in women’s clothes, inside the “Somali Mall”



All the Somalis I met shop for clothes only in this mall. There are different shops selling men’s and women’s clothes.

There is a coffee shop in the mall, which only had Somali men as customers on my visits there, mostly cab drivers. When I asked one of my interviewees, who incidentally was a woman, why there were no women in the coffee shop, she said that respectable Somali girls do not go inside (Somali) restaurants and coffee shops.

Image 6.4: A store selling fashion accessories for women inside the “Mall”



Most of the stores in the mall, as well as independent Somali ones outside the mall, are family owned and operated; some of them have been here for as long as 11 years. When

family labour is not enough, the Somali shop owners hire members from their own community, and that is the first job of many Somalis who arrive in the United States with no marketable skills and low language proficiency. Somali is the primary language used within these stores, and they serve as a meeting place for the community members where they exchange information about other community members and events. A lot of these stores have chairs at the back of the store or around the counters so that the community members can sit down and have a conversation with the shop-owners and other Somali customers over a cup of coffee and, in case of some of the men, *qat*.

Most of these Somali stores are quite distinctive in nature in comparison with much of the surrounding urban landscape. Not only do they have Somali names (Images 6.1 and 6.2), in addition to signboards in English, enterprises such as restaurants, grocery stores and other stores selling Somali ethnic food, spices and goods have signs in Arabic that proclaim their Somali affiliation (Image 6.1).

Generally ethnic areas are associated with physical space that is filled with ethnic markers and traits, but intangible ethnic places also exist. According to Chacko (2003: 37):

A pre-requisite for ethnic space is a community of co-ethnics who use and mark the area as one dedicated to the group. Ethnic areas with these very characteristics can be forged in cyberspace and through various media even though they may not be in the same broadly defined physical space.

There are several Somali websites which are more of a social space rather than a

technical one, developed to share ideas and opinions about their native country. These are frequented by most members of the Somali diaspora, and a number of my interviewees also contribute to some websites like www.markacadeey.com/maqaalo.htm, www.hiiraan.com and www.gedoonline.com. Ethnic spaces come into being through these dedicated ethnic websites, online transactions, television and radio programs that target specific immigrant groups, as community is created through shared experiences (Zeigler and Brunn 2000). While these websites do not stop casual visitors from obtaining information, they are extremely valuable to the people in the Somali diaspora as well as to those who have access to the internet in Kenya. These websites provide news about the Somali diaspora in different parts of the world, the events they hold, the artists they host, local celebrations they have for traditional festivals and other events. They also provide a place for the Somali communities in different countries, states and cities to share ideas, collaborate with each other and resolve similar problems.

Living in Kansas City ‘The Somali Way’

Somalis are known to have a distinct mentality that has contributed to some material success for a number of refugees within the short period that they have been in the United States. Part of the Somali way meant trying their absolute best to not apply for public assistance for cash (some received Medicaid or food stamps) or if they had to then not only relying on it for an extended period of time. All my interviewees were eligible for eight months of assistance but were given only three months because of the lack of funds in JVS. Some of the newly settled ones had already started working within a month of

arriving here. A few of the Somalis were still getting food stamps after they got laid off from their jobs during the 2008 economic meltdown.

I did not meet any Somali refugees who used the social welfare system beyond the initial eight month refugee resettlement period, and in fact none of them received it for more than three months, as mentioned earlier. All of them got off the system to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities like driving taxi-cabs, driving trucks, opening up restaurants, opening up grocery stores, halal meat shops (which have a big market among Somalis but also cater to even the non-Somali Muslim population in the locality), money transfer centers and clothes shops.

Conclusion

While maintaining their identity and making efforts to progress socially and economically within the American society, the Somali refugees engage in place-making, establishing ethnic spaces in the northeastern part of Kansas City. The evolving ethnic places in the Greater Kansas City area clearly reflect the needs and aspirations of the Somali community (Chacko 2003). They have created ethnic places in both traditional and new ways. While the traditional sites have distinct physical markers like socio-commercial establishments, they also used ephemeral public arenas which were used for community youth meetings and festivals. These places bear ethnic codes which are known only to the insiders and informed outsiders. There are even lesser visible ethnic spaces produced on the internet and media which attract viewers from across the globe.

As Chacko (2003: 39) explains:

In a fragmented world characterized by residential dispersion, these non-tangible spaces are as important as traditional ethnic spaces in maintaining connections, identity and unity.

As the Somali community in Kansas City continues to grow in size and power, the ethnic places discussed here will expand and undergo transformation, and as has been seen in the trajectory of other, now more established immigrant communities, they will move towards the suburbs as the members of their community prosper and relocate from the present limited area of public and subsidized housing. It is right now in its nascent stages, with only a handful of stores and a single religious institution, but as the population grows and the community prospers, these places will have to expand and disperse as well.

In the next chapter, I discuss my findings in the field, propose a few measures to make the relocation process more viable and relatively easier for the Somali refugees and look at future research opportunities.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

I started this project with two basic questions: One, how do Somali refugees and immigrants in Kansas City cope with their lives in a totally different environment and what are the factors that affect their assimilation process; and two, how they make their mark on the cultural landscape of this mid-sized Midwestern city which is non-traditional migrant getaway.

Based on existing literature I knew that the Somalis in Kansas City had a lot of traumatic experiences in Somalia and the Dadaab refugee camps, which shaped their way of thinking and made them tentative and distrustful. Apart from that, I suspected that finding employment would be a challenge for them due to low English language proficiency and qualification restrictions. I found that the age of the Somali refugees was an important factor in determining the rate of assimilation and social interaction, and that preserving their culture was important to the Somalis. It was also apparent that the resettlement policies of the United States, which insisted on “60 days self-sufficiency” sometimes led the refugees to make hard choices which in the long run hampered their chance of gaining economic prosperity.

Although one can list innumerable factors that affect the assimilation of refugees based on my study findings, it is clear that there were some factors which played a stronger, more influential role than others. According to Khoo et. al (1994), new Americans coming from countries where English is taught as a second language or have English-

language backgrounds have an easier time starting off their new lives. This was not the case with the Somali refugees. A large portion spoke very limited English or none at all. . Those refugees who participated in English classes for a year at least spoke broken English and could hardly communicate effectively. As mentioned earlier, the American resettlement program rules clearly state that refugees' "first goal should be to take any job" (Refugee Service Center 1996: 37) and that "English skills would improve through study and informal contacts with other Americans" (Refugee Service Center 1996: 38). It can be difficult to learn English on the job because the refugees may lack the skills and confidence to even open channels of communication to co-workers (Mertus, et al. 1997). While studying the stressors of exile among Eastern European refugees in Chicago, Mertus, et al.(2002: 349) found that the inability to speak English resulted in a lack of environmental mastery, underscoring "the importance of linguistic competence in effectively negotiating the environment and particularly in gaining access to important educational and employment-related resources." While studying the English- language learning of Indochinese refugees in the United States, Tollefson noted that the language policy which shaped American ESL courses for refugees was "designed to channel them into jobs in the peripheral economy" (1991: 108). My findings were similar, as those refugees who were employed in low-wage jobs had either practically no involvement in ESL courses because they had to work right away or participated in courses that were ineffective which often led the refugees to drop out of these classes. Policy-makers and other government officials assume that those who are successful in learning the language of the host country work hard, while those who finish language courses but do not learn the language or do not participate at all are unmotivated and thus responsible for their

own separation and marginalization (Tollefson 1991, 1986). They fail to understand that the age, educational and cultural background of refugees and immigrants and the ESL classes that are being offered influence their language learning capacity.

Employment was viewed as both an economic and social imperative by all my interviewees. According to Lavik et al. (1996) having a job contributed to their development of a new identity in the host country by influencing their general state of well-being and giving their lives structure and meaning. Employment is supposed to foster individual competence and self-worth. But among the refugees I interviewed, only the jobs of a small minority had such a positive influence in their lives. Although their jobs helped pay bills and they were grateful to have those jobs, they were not particularly proud of doing these jobs and among the unemployed, there was great frustration at the inability to find any work. As Korac (2003) found in her study of refugees from the former Yugoslavia that had resettled in Rome, employment was one of the most difficult challenges due to a number of factors: the closed nature of the labor market in the host country, policies that purposefully excluded most refugees from positions or areas of expertise which they had held in their countries of origin, and the refugees' lack of language proficiency. This is similar to what I found in my research, where regardless of their educational background or area of expertise, the Somali refugees found work in the lowest paying sectors. This finding was consistent with other studies examining refugee employment in Canada (Krahn, et al. 2000; Tousignant 1997; Dorais 1991), Italy (Korac 2003, 2001), the United Kingdom (Duke 1996), and the United States (Takeda 2000), which highlights the need of an intervention, otherwise most refugees with little to no

English proficiency will continue to end up in low-skill, low-wage labor from which there is little or no upward mobility.

Similar to Korac's (2001) discussion of integration as an interactive, mutually adaptive phenomenon, my study found an important difference between the social support of congregational sponsors and that provided within the Somali community. Social support on the individual level has been found to be a key element in ensuring refugees' wellbeing in resettlement (Beiser and Johnson 2003; Rousseau, et al. 1998; Breslow, et al. 1997). In my study, there were numerous examples of social support among the Somali refugees which were important to their emotional and financial wellbeing. These are also important to the success of the Somali community during the resettlement process. Islam is a critical component to the identity of the Somali community. Kinship, social contract and religion are all forms of social capital and support that are critical to the successful assimilation of the Somali community in Kansas City. My research findings revealed that in order for social support to be influential in assimilation, the support had to be positive, sustained, and interactive with members of the host country. Social support given by Somalis to each other is important in strengthening the Somali community within the city but if the interaction between refugees and members of the host country remains minimal, then the refugees continued to feel disconnected from the host community and receiving society.

An important theme that emerged from my focus groups and interviews was "national affiliation." All my interviewees described whether or not they believed that they were a

part of the host country and whether or not they felt the host country accepted them for who they were. The concept of “national affiliation” was created referring to the ease with which one could relate to the identity of the host country and feel ownership of that identity, or the extent to which one felt his or her identity from the country of origin could be a valid, integral part of one’s identity in the host country. National affiliation also turned out to be a significant contributor to whether or not refugees found it possible to move beyond assimilation and lead normal lives.

When asked whether they had experienced discrimination, most of the participants said that, beyond the initial curiosity of their neighbours and attracting looks on the streets because of their traditional Somali clothes, they did not have any negative experience. However, there were some who had faced discrimination out on the streets or at their work place. The refugees had firm convictions about their rightful place in American society, even if they did not feel assimilated. Less than a quarter of the refugees celebrated American national holidays, such as the 4th of July, Presidents’ Day or Veterans’ Day, and even the ones who did celebrated it by eating goat and rice, in the “Somali Way”. They did, however, celebrate all the Somali and Islamic religious holidays. They remembered the dates and significance of these holidays, because these were the interview questions that immigration officials had asked them when they were applying for citizenship. Most refugees did not consider themselves Americans at the time of the interviews, and many conveyed their determination to hold on to being a Somali. As one of my interviewees, Najma, who is a United States citizen now, said:

“I am a Somali and I want to remain a Somali. I can live in America and follow all the rules and everything, but still here (placing a hand over her heart), I am Somali” (January, 2011).

As far as their identity is concerned, most Somalis do not identify themselves as Americans at all, though some consider themselves Somali-American. Their skin color, dress, language, food, music, religion, and culture set them apart immediately and they had to overcome some barriers initially, even as they continue to grapple with these issues.

I think to facilitate the assimilation of Somali refugees, the policymakers should ensure refugee representation in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of resettlement services. It is important to understand the importance and the role that cities can play in the assimilation of refugees. Cities are responsible for organizing and regulating many activities of daily urban life that may seem mundane, but nevertheless crucial to the social and economic inclusion of its residents. A few of the most critical points in terms of encouraging a two-way integration or assimilation process of refugees in the host communities revolve around positive encounters between these groups in public spaces and perceived inequalities in access to public services and goods. While the enforcement of building codes, management of social housing, police, schools, and transportation services, and supporting the economic development for a range of social groups and communities may not be leading national policy concerns, these issues, related policies, and their execution make a significant difference at the scale where social inclusion is lived and negotiated on a daily basis.

As cities across the world become the focal points of post-industrial economic growth and immigrant settlement, city government agencies, social groups and organizations of civil society are playing ever more influential roles in shaping social inclusion and making pathways for assimilation. Cities are now taking on new policies, programs, and responsibilities that were traditionally associated with more senior-level governments in order to respond to the needs, challenges, and opportunities of their new residents, institutions, and economic activities. In addition to that, cities must also continue to play a role in creating socially and economically inclusive environments by pursuing strategic urban management initiatives. Urban transportation, policing, and housing, for example, are not normally thought of as immigrant and refugee integration programs, even if they seek to achieve greater social inclusion, but they do play a significant role in bringing about assimilation of refugees and if they are not handled properly, these new populations end up feeling neglected, isolated and marginalized by the mainstream society.

There are cities that may be able to draw unintended benefits from decisions made decades earlier as they deal with new residents from foreign countries. For example, as stated earlier, JVS and the Don Bosco Centers were originally established to assist holocaust survivors and an Italian immigrant community, respectively, in the 1940s, and now they are two of the main players in the refugee resettlement program in Kansas City. Although Kansas City is not a traditional immigrant destination, unlike other new gateway cities which lack the institutional services designed to serve the immigrant and refugee populations because there has been no need for such arrangements until recently,

the people in Kansas City are much better prepared for these newly settled populations.

It is important to expand and strengthen the role of community based organizations to facilitate the assimilation of the Somali refugees in Kansas City. The main community organization in my research has been the Somali Foundation, and their role in strengthening the place of the Somali community in the city is unmistakable. Even just a few years ago, the Somali community did not have a place where they could all congregate and discuss the major issues that the community is struggling with, but now, they have multiple programs and initiatives which help the older members of the their community, their youth, and women. They have now started celebrating Somali Independence Day and other Somali events where they invite congressmen and other policymakers from the area, so that they are aware that there is a growing community of Somalis in the city. This also makes the Somali community more visible in the city. They have recently received a grant from an Ethiopian organization in Arlington, Virginia, which they will use to plan a community change and capacity building program for Somali and other East African refugees in Kansas City. This plan has been discussed in detail in chapter three.

Like all new Americans, the Somali refugees go through a long and often painful process of adaptation and assimilation to their new country and struggle to become a part of the American society. The process is a continuum that begins with settlement, when newcomers make the basic adjustments to life in a new country, then moving to assimilation, which is the longer term process through which newcomers become full and

equal participants in all the different spheres of society. Although it is the refugees that do most of the hard work of adapting themselves to their new country, assimilation has to be a two-way road, which means that the host society also has a responsibility to adapt itself to its new members and offer them the full opportunity to be a part of the mainstream society and contribute the resources they bring with them. Refugees and immigrants have basic settlement needs like orientation upon arrival, language learning and finding employment. They may also have some more specific needs because of their experience of insecurity and persecution prior to coming to the United States. The most important sources of information and guidance for refugees are friends, family, faith communities and other co-ethnics who came here before them. Somali refugees sometimes also struggle against the racism in the host society. It affects their confidence and makes them feel unwelcome in the host country. It is the responsibility of the host society to welcome them and to allow them to find a space to be either Somali Americans or American Somalis. This is not only good for the Somalis, but also for the American society.

As Mr. Abdi said, the future of the Somali community lies in the hands of the Somali youth. While they still have a long way to go, I have found complex, intersecting influences on young Somali refugee identity formations. A sense of ‘belonging’ in a country develops when a community has a sense of security and space to define its own identity beyond the narrow prescriptions of national identity. He further adds that the policies that are implemented to support Somali youth, should be aimed help them adapt to and assimilate into the United States. These policies should also help them to retain

and develop a strong sense of their own cultural identity and heritage, while also supporting them to access education, services and similar life opportunities as the rest of the American population.

The Somali refugees in Kansas City have some specific needs which need to be addressed first.

- There has to be a more effective process of preparation and reception to support refugee and children's entry into schools in the United States.
- Stressing the importance of a shared national identity in policy initiative can have the potential effect of legitimizing negative attitudes by the majority host population towards refugees and immigrants and their cultures. The policymakers need to address that issue and make sure that the host population understands that the refugees, once resettled are as American as they are.
- Promote social contact between Somali community and the host community.
- Support the development of the proposed Somali community space and help with the capacity building measures and community change project being undertaken by the Somali Foundation, as this would generate a sense of belonging in the Somalis.
- Train more Somali elders to work as mentors with the young men and women in their community.

A few of my interviewees told me about some issues that the mainstream community is having issues with the Somali community in Kansas City. There have been hate crimes and racist incidents in the school system in Kansas City, and this has occurred because of ignorance and bias. Media reports about young Somali men from Minneapolis who have returned to Somalia to fight in the *jihad* (Islamic wars) seem to be the main cause of this

tension. But unfortunately, as one of my interviewees said, the crimes against them never get reported in the local media, yet even if they are caught for speeding, they are instantly looked at with suspicion. The recent efforts within the Somali community are geared towards engaging the youth, so that they do not feel isolated and marginalized from the host community. These efforts are currently in the planning stages and will be led by Somalis in partnership with a few local and state institutions.

This project is a look at the whole course of the refugee experience from flight to resettlement by using the experience of the Somali refugees in Kansas City to understand it. It has highlighted how the support of family and community play a crucial role in the assimilation experience of the Somali refugees. It also reinforces the fact that for any new American refugee community the challenges in culture, religion, social support, language and employment need to be addressed if they are to adapt and assimilate successfully into a new host country and receiving society. Policy-makers in the government and public administration should especially note this, as they try to understand and improve refugee resettlement practices and programs.

As I wrap up this project and take a look at my research findings, I can clearly identify several significant areas for my postdoctoral research, such as studying the lives of the Somali refugees in the Dadaab camps. If I get an opportunity to go for fieldwork to Dadaab, apart from studying the living conditions and insecurities faced by the refugees in great detail, I would also study the cultural orientation classes that these refugees have to attend before they depart for the United States or any other country and see how they

“prepare” the Somali refugees for resettlement in a totally different environment about which they have very little knowledge. Up until now, I have only heard about the trials and tribulations in the refugee camps from my interviewees, but if I get to actually go to the camps, I can study the lives of recently admitted refugees as opposed to those who have been living in the camps for an extended period of time and what strategies they adapt to deal with camp life. I would also be able to interact with the officials from UNHCR and other agencies working there and understand how they work with these refugees and be able to hear their “take” on the whole refugee camp experience. This will help me fill a gap in my understanding of the challenges that the refugees face here and their reactions to it.

In addition to that, a comparative study between the 70,000 strong economically and politically visible Somali community in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and the rapidly growing but small Somali community in Kansas City would also be interesting and can give us a better understanding of how important community support can be in the refugee assimilation process.

As seen in the Literature Review in chapter one, historically geographers have been more interested in studying the spatiality of immigrant communities and the processes that influence the shape of their patterns. My work has been most influenced by Wei Li and Elizabeth Chacko’s work on new diasporas. While in the field, I found that Li and Texeira’s (2007) claims that access to affording housing in a “welcoming society/community” and education and employment opportunities makes the assimilation

process relatively easier and less intimidating for the newly arrived refugees are true. But my research also shows that the assimilation challenges faced by newly arrived immigrants and refugees go much beyond that and that language, religion, social support, gender and citizenship and advocacy issues play an important role in the assimilation process of Somali refugees into the American mainstream society. Also, signs of an emerging ethnic enclave are evident in Northeastern Kansas City. Although it is still in its infancy, it is clear that Chacko's (2003) argument about immigrants trying to find alternative means to support themselves economically and also trying to create a space for themselves which in their minds resembles "home" is true. These immigrants also lead lives the "Somali Way" in what Chacko called "Ethnic arenas", where although there are no physical markers of ethnic life, inside their homes and organizations, they continue to lead a life the way they would back in their source country.

While this study is informed by the work of these geographers, I believe that the study of the geography of migration or diaspora is an extremely rich space for interdisciplinary work, and that is what I have tried to do here. This dissertation is informed as much by the work of geographers, as it is by the works of other migration scholars like Maja Korac and Cindy Horst.

Finally through this study I hope to add to that literature of how individuals and specific communities deal with challenges of resettlement, especially in a small and non-traditional migrant getaway city like Kansas City. The fact that the Somali refugees strategize remittances, within households and across nation states with their relatives, is

something new that I discovered during my fieldwork in Kansas City. Generally, we always focus on how much money is being sent back or what that money is being used for. That there is a lot of thought and speculation and planning that goes into this, is often overlooked.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the Somalis in Kansas City are trying to mark their area in the northwest part of the city by building businesses, mosques, etc. While talking about the formation of ethnic enclaves in migrant getaways, we always concentrate on the physical markers that make these ethnic spaces and ignore the virtual spaces that these refugees have formed for their communities. The Somali refugees, especially the Somali youth have a very strong presence on the web. There are a number of websites which not only serve as a place for political discussions and other social problems that the Somalis face, but also as a place where Somali communities from across the world share their news, activities, major achievements and also discuss possible solutions of their problems after their resettlement. This is a major source and often the only source of news from other Somali communities and a large part of their everyday lives are spent and dedicated to these virtual spaces.

This is also the first study in cultural geography of this particular Somali community and through this, I hope to at least bring to light the basic assimilation challenges they face when resettled here and also highlight the three major local organizations that help them adapt and rebuild their lives in Kansas City.

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